Scottish Literature in the Classroom

Scottish Poetry Collection for Higher English:

Nan Shepherd's 'Summit at Corrie Etchachan'

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Using the Teaching Materials

The Scottish Literature in the Classroom project aims to support teachers of secondary English by providing resources on the new Scottish Set Texts at National 5 and Higher. This teaching guide is part of a series focused on the Scottish Poetry Collection for Higher. Each guide provides contextual information on the poem and author and a detailed reading of the given text, as well as discussion prompts and practice exam questions. Other online resources that may be helpful to teachers and students are also listed here.

Teachers are encouraged to utilise and adapt materials to best suit their own classrooms, combining with their own activities on, for example, poetic techniques and literary analysis.

'Summit of Corrie Etchachan' was written by Nan Shepherd. It is reproduced here by kind permission of the estate, and the publisher - Galileo. Teaching resource written by Pip Osmond-Williams. Thanks also to Rhona Brown, Jennifer Farrar, Maureen Farrell, Corey Gibson, Ronnie Young, and teacher colleagues across Scotland for their guidance and support.

Context

Poem overview

‘Summit of Corrie Etchachan’ is a free-verse poem that portrays a physical journey in the Cairngorms and a philosophical inquiry into what true achievement or understanding might look like.

The poem follows a clear narrative arc:

– the ascent;
– the moment of pause or contemplation at the summit;
– the realisation or introspection that follows.

The journey to the summit and the expectation of a clear peak or vista is juxtaposed with the reality of a grey plateau. This may be seen as a metaphor for the mind’s journey towards truth or enlightenment, where the end might be less about clarity and more about a profound, often ambiguous, sense of one’s own capabilities and limitations.

‘Summit of Corrie Etchachan’ aligns with Nan Shepherd’s larger body of work, which explores themes of immersion in the natural world and the dissolution of boundaries between self and landscape. Her writing often eschews the anthropocentric perspective to celebrate the value and power of nature on its own terms.

Author background

Anna (Nan) Shepherd (1893–1981) was a poet, writer and teacher born in Aberdeenshire, where she remained throughout her life. Her poetry, novels and prose are all set in this region: Aberdeen and its suburbs, the crofting communities of the Mearns, and the Cairngorms.

Shepherd was deeply inspired by the landscapes of the Cairngorms, a mountain range in north-east Scotland whose foothills rise a few miles from Cults, a suburb on the western edge of Aberdeen where Shepherd lived. Her intimacy with the mountains was fundamental to her writing; her novels, poems, essays and letters were shaped by her years of exploring the Cairngorms on foot. She was also strongly influenced by her reading in Buddhism and the Tao. This informed her philosophical understanding of the

relationship between nature and the mind; she believed there to be a continual traffic between the outer landscapes of the world and the inner landscapes of the spirit.

There has been a significant resurgence of interest in Nan Shepherd in the 21st century, particularly in her nature writing. In an era of climate change and environmental awareness, Shepherd's deep and poetic engagement with the Cairngorms resonates with modern readers seeking a more mindful relationship with nature. Writers such as Robert Macfarlane and others in the 'new nature writing' movement have championed her work, and the rise in popularity of nature-oriented literature has brought Shepherd's prose and poetry to a new generation of readers.

In 2016, the Royal Bank of Scotland introduced a £5 note featuring a portrait of Nan Shepherd and two quotes from her work:

- 'It's a grand thing to get leave to live' – *The Quarry Wood* (1928)
- 'But the struggle between frost and the force in running water is not quickly over. The battle fluctuates, and at the point of fluctuation between the motion in water and the immobility of frost, strange and beautiful forms are evolved' – *The Living Mountain* (1977)

A public vote saw the scientist Mary Somerville selected to feature on the £10 note, circulated the following year. Malcolm Buchanan, RBS board chair, said that the new issues celebrated 'the fantastic, and often overlooked, achievements of two great Scottish women'.

Publication details

'Summit of Corrie Etchachan' was published in Nan Shepherd's only collection of poems, *In the Cairngorms* (The Moray Press, 1934; republished by Galileo Press, 2014), which she wrote over 25 years. The volume engages with the vastness, beauty and ultimate indifference of rock, water, light and air and expresses Shepherd's deep kinship with nature.

Other previously unpublished poems by Shepherd are collected, along with essays and short stories, in *Wild Geese: A Collection of Nan Shepherd's Writing* (Galileo Press, 2019).

Shepherd's prose meditation on the Cairngorms, *The Living Mountain* (Aberdeen University Press, 1977), was written during the final years of the Second World War. It draws on her lifetime of walking in the Cairngorms and connecting with the natural world. The final paragraph of this work expresses the spiritual significance of her journeys into the mountains, as captured in 'Summit of Corrie Etchachan':

> I believe that I now understand in some small measure why the Buddhist goes on pilgrimage to a mountain. The journey is itself part of the technique by which the god is sought. It is a journey into Being; for as I penetrate more deeply into the mountain's life, I penetrate also into my own. For an hour I am beyond desire. It is not ecstasy, that leap out of the self that makes man like a god. I am not out of myself, but in myself. I am. To know Being, this is the final grace accorded from the mountains.
>
> Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain* (Canongate, 2014), page 108.

Shepherd also published three novels: *The Quarry Wood* (1928), *The Weatherhouse* (1930), and *A Pass in the Grampians* (1933).

Online resources

https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poet/nan-shepherd/ features a biography of Shepherd, four of her poems, and a selected bibliography.

The version of 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' printed here and published on the Scottish Poetry Library website is the one that will be used in exams, valid from session 2025–26 onwards. (The poem itself is not covered by the CC BY-NC-SA license.)

'Summit of Corrie Etchachan'

by Nan Shepherd

But in the climbing ecstasy of thought,
Ere consummation, ere the final peak,
Come hours like this. Behind, the long defile,
The steep rock-path, alongside which, from under
Snow-caves, sharp-corniced, tumble the ice-cold waters.
And now, here, at the corrie's summit, no peak,
No vision of the blue world, far, unattainable,
But this grey plateau, rock-strewn, vast, silent,
The dark loch, the toiling crags, the snow;
A mountain shut within itself, yet a world,
Immensity. So may the mind achieve,
Toiling, no vision of the infinite,
But a vast, dark and inscrutable sense
Of its own terror, its own glory and power.

Corrie Etchachan

A corrie is the name given in the Scottish Highlands to a more or less circular hollow on a mountain side, surrounded with steep slopes or precipices except at the lowest part, where a stream usually flows. The term 'corrie' comes from the Scottish Gaelic 'coire', meaning cauldron.

Image: Ford over the Coire Etchachan Burn.
Photograph by Jeff Collins, licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

Corrie Etchachan is a relatively low-lying and remote water-filled bowl in the Cairngorms on the boundary between south-west Moray and west Aberdeenshire. At the head of the corrie lies Loch Etchachan, a freshwater loch that is the highest waterbody of its size in the UK.

In *The Living Mountain*, Shepherd writes that 'My first climb was Ben MacDhui' – the highest mountain in the Cairngorms, and the second highest in Britain – 'by the classic route of Coire Etchachan'. She continues:

> The end of a climb meant for me always the opening of a spacious view over the world: that was the moment of glory. But to toil upwards, feel the gradient slacken and the top approach, as one does at the end of the Etchachan ascent, and then find no spaciousness for reward, but an interior – that astounded me. And what an interior! the boulder-strewn plain, the silent shining loch, the black overhang of its

> precipice, the drop to Loch Avon and the soaring barricade of Cairn Gorm beyond, and on every side, except where we had entered, towering mountain walls.
>
> Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain* (Canongate, 2014), page 16.

Having at first 'made always for the summits' (p. 9), Shepherd's experience at Corrie Etchachan inspired the idea that 'a mountain has an inside' (p. 16). She searches and explores the interior of the Cairngorms as well as her own interior, creating a sense of interconnectedness between the mountains and the self.

The Living Mountain relates how, over time, she learned to go to the hills aimlessly, 'merely to be with the mountain as one visits a friend, with no intention but to be with him' (p. 15). In this way, Shepherd's work is distinct from the themes of competition and victory typical of mountaineering literature; she does not attempt to claim or conquer the mountain but rather be in harmony with it.

The Sublime

The sublime in poetry refers to a literary and philosophical concept that evokes a sense of awe and grandeur which transcends normal human understanding and pushes the limits of one's emotional and intellectual capacities. In 'A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful' (1757), Edmund Burke proposed that the sublime is associated with pain, terror, or vastness, which paradoxically gives pleasure.

Romantic writers in the late 18th and early 19th century explored this paradox, where the awe and fear inspired by nature or the unknown could lead to a profound aesthetic experience. Poets such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge often depicted nature in its most magnificent or terrifying forms, such as mountains, storms, or vast seascapes, which evoke feelings of both fear and wonder. This encounter with nature's immensity was thought to elevate the human spirit, prompting reflections on one's place in the universe.

Experiencing the sublime often leads to introspection, where the individual confronts their own smallness against the backdrop of the vast or the infinite. This confrontation can lead to a sublime moment of insight or spiritual awakening, where one feels a connection to something larger than themselves.

Full analysis

Form and structure

'Summit at Corrie Etchachan' is a 14-line poem written in free verse, which means that it does not adhere to a strict rhyme scheme or metre. The lack of formal constraints mirrors the vastness and unpredictability of both the mountainous landscape and the workings of the mind and allows for a natural, meditative flow, capturing the slow ascent and contemplation of the speaker.

Lines 1–2

But in the climbing ecstasy of thought,
Ere consummation, ere the final peak,

With the title having indicated the setting of the poem, the verb 'climbing' evokes the physical act of scaling a mountain. This act is mirrored in the mind: thoughts (ideas or reflections) grow in 'ecstasy', which refers to an emotional or religious frenzy. The coordinating conjunction 'but' indicates that this state of emotional escalation will alter in some way as the poem and physical/philosophical journey continue.

'Consummation' refers to the act of completing or accomplishing. Conquering the mountain or reaching 'the final peak' does not mark the momentous or transformative point in the journey depicted. Instead, the poem stresses the significance of a time/place that precedes the top of the mountain, emphasised by the repetition of 'ere', an archaic term that means 'before'. There is a sense, therefore, that the mountain is being experienced out of the usual sequence.

Line 3

Come hours like this. Behind, the long defile,

'But' in line 1 distinguishes the 'ecstasy of thought' that was experienced while climbing from the 'hours like this' spent at the 'plateau' (l. 8), suggesting a period of stasis and reflection during which the mind-state alters. The significance of these hours is emphasised by the enjambment of the line.

Meaning a narrow gorge through mountains, ‘defile’ originates from a military description of a route or passage that soldiers journey through in single file. ‘Behind’ indicates that the ascension of this passage has been achieved. The description that follows of treacherous terrain infers the physical rigour required to make it to this point, yet the poem’s focus remains on the landscape.

Lines 4–5

The steep rock-path, alongside which, from under
Snow-caves, sharp-corniced, tumble the ice-cold waters.

Lines 4–5 immerse the reader in the mountain’s terrain and illustrate its treacherous nature with the adjectives ‘steep’, ‘sharp’ and ‘ice-cold’. The prepositions ‘alongside’ and ‘under’ indicate the various positions of the stream, with assonance and alliteration creating a sense of movement that reflects the tumbling water. The motion of the water highlights the interaction of different natural elements, which is enhanced by the references to rock, snow, ice and water.

These lines also locate the speaker in relation to the mountain’s features, with the human body both dictated to and challenged by the landscape in a way that heightens perception and presence in that space. The ‘steep rock-path’ demands careful navigation and an acute awareness of the body’s balance, while the ‘snow-caves, sharp-corniced’ introduce an architectural sense of enclosure and threshold, spaces formed not by human hands but by the interplay of ice, rock, and time.

Lines 6–7

And now, here, at the corrie’s summit, no peak,
No vision of the blue world, far, unattainable,

In Buddhist teachings, mindfulness is a state of mind that a person may achieve by focusing on the present moment, embracing its lessons, and responding to its call with awareness. Line 6 embodies this idea in two short words – ‘now, here’ – which draw attention to the significance of the present moment and being at the corrie’s summit.

The poem defies the expectation of a summit: there is neither a peak to conquer nor a panoramic view of the world beyond. ‘No vision’ implies the expectation of clarity or fulfilment, and the reality of reaching the summit, which does not provoke an epiphany. ‘Far’ and ‘unattainable’ create a sense of physical and spiritual distance between being on (or in) the mountain and being in the ‘blue world’ beyond. This phrase evokes both the physical vastness of the sky and the emotional or philosophical longing for something beyond reach.

Lines 8–9

But this grey plateau, rock-strewn, vast, silent,
The dark loch, the toiling crags, the snow;

As the list of adjectives and geologic features builds, so does the sense of the mountain as formidable. Shepherd’s use of imagery expresses the timeless quality of the landscape as well as the power of nature. ‘Dark’ may symbolise the unfathomable, while the slow geological processes hinted at by ‘toiling crags’ speak to themes of permanence versus human transience. The scene evokes a sense of solitude, which invites the introspection that follows in lines 11–14.

Lines 10–11

A mountain shut within itself, yet a world,
Immensity. So may the mind achieve,

The phrase ‘shut within itself’ suggests a sense of isolation or seclusion. It conveys an impression of inaccessibility or self-containment, where the mountain exists in its own realm, separate from the surrounding world.

The use of ‘yet’ establishes a contrast between the mountain’s perceived isolation and its inherent complexity. Despite its self-containment, the mountain hosts a multitude of life, ecosystems, and natural phenomena. This duality highlights the theme of unity within diversity: the mountain is one, yet it encompasses countless elements, from flora and fauna to geological features.

‘Immensity’ implies both the impressive physical presence of the landscape and its impact on the self or spirit. The poem’s final sentence shifts the focus from nature to the self, suggesting that like a mountain the mind can be both self-contained and expansive.

Lines 12–14

Toiling, no vision of the infinite,
But a vast, dark and inscrutable sense
Of its own terror, its own glory and power.

‘Toiling’ refers to intensive labour, which may be physical or mental. Here it is not an expression of bodily exertion, a typical trope of mountaineering literature, but rather the mental endeavour of introspection stimulated by the experience of being at one with the mountain. The repetition of ‘toiling’ (lines 9 and 12) to describe the crags and the human mind emphasises the connection between the two.

‘Toiling’ acknowledges the efforts of the mind, but the subsequent phrase implies that the transformative revelation brought about by introspection is beyond comprehension: ‘the infinite’ is sensed rather than understood. Just as the mountain is ‘vast’ and ‘dark’ (lines 8 and 9) so is the mind’s sense of itself.

Existential awareness is realised in the exploration of the self that is prompted by the mountain. The awe-inspiring physical landscape is mirrored in the ‘terror’, ‘glory’ and ‘power’ of the mind. ‘Terror’, a standalone word in the line, may represent the unknown; ‘glory and power’ imply the strength and capacity of the human mind and its ability to comprehend, if only partially and fleetingly, the vastness of being.

Discussion Prompts

Introductory

- What do you know, or what can you find out, about the place this poem is named for?
- List any odd features or unfamiliar words in the poem. How might you understand them?
- Why might it be significant that it seems to start in the middle of a thought ('But…')?
- The poem is very short. Why might this be appropriate for its subject matter?

Techniques

- The poem seems to come from the voice of someone during a climb. But, there is no 'I' there: no personal pronouns. Why?
- What might someone hope to achieve by listing the features of the landscape they are standing in?
- What tense is the poem written in and why?
- What expectations does the speaker have about the climb? Are they met?

Themes

- When have you felt awe and fear at once? What do these feelings (awe and fear) have to do with one another?
- How much work does your imagination have to do to recognise every detail of your exact place in space and time at any given moment, in any given place?
- How does the poem come to compare the mountain and the mind? What do they have in common?
- The poem seems to suggest that there are things that are beyond our imagination and our appreciation. What kinds of things are like this? Why are they difficult to talk about?
- The poem seems to suggest that we can be both fear and appreciate the power of our minds. What kinds of situation might prompt you to feel this way?
- Why might you need to get away to a landscape like the one described in the poem in order to prompt these thoughts and feelings?

Practice Questions

Look at lines 1–5.

By referring to **at least two** examples, analyse how the poet's use of language conveys the difficulty of the climb. (4 marks)

Look at lines 6–11.

By referring to **at least two** examples, analyse how the poet's use of language conveys the surroundings of the speaker. (4 marks)

Look at lines 11–14.

Analyse how the poet's use of language conveys a sense of admiration and/or wonder. (2 marks)

By referring to this poem and to at least one other poem from the Higher Scottish Poetry Collection, discuss how the poets use individual moments to explore central concerns. (10 marks)

NB. Poems that Nan Shepherd's 'Summit of Corrie Etchachan' might be compared with for the 10-mark question are:

- 'Thomas the Rhymer' (traditional ballad)
- 'Composed In August' by Robert Burns
- 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' by Hugh MacDiarmid
- 'Da Clearance' by Rhoda Bulter
- '33' by MacGillivray

Connections / Comparisons

The visual below highlights connecting themes that may be useful to consider for the 8- or 10-mark exam question. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list – you may wish to explore beyond these categories and consider how different themes might overlap or contradict one another within and between texts.