Scottish Literature in the Classroom

# Scottish Poetry Collection for Higher English:

# Rhoda Bulter's 'Da Clearance'

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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.

*'Da Clearance' was written by Rhoda Bulter. It is reproduced here by kind permission of the estate, and publisher – The Shetland Times. Teaching resource written by Pip Osmond-Williams. Thanks also to Rhona Brown, Bruce Eunson, Jennifer Farrar, Maureen Farrell, Corey Gibson, Laura Green, Ronnie Young, and teacher colleagues across Scotland for their guidance and support.*

# Context

## Poem overview

'Da Clearance' is a poem about the Clearances of the 18th and 19th centuries, which affected the Scottish Highlands, the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland. People were evicted, or cleared, from land inhabited for generations to make way for more profitable sheep farming. By focusing on one particular community, reflected in the title's singular 'Clearance', the poem evokes a sense of the personal loss experienced by those who were forcibly removed from their homes.

The setting of 'Da Clearance' is a crofting township in Shetland. The poem is written in the first person and the present tense, with the speaker portraying the township and its community before the Clearances, during the evictions, and in the present day.

- Stanza 1 depicts the everyday working and domestic life in the township before the Clearances, which is portrayed as a time of harmony.
- Stanza 2 is set within a home in the township, with tensions rising as the community anticipates the events to come.
- Stanza 3 describes the eviction of people from their homes by the men sent by the landlord.
- Stanza 4 reflects on the aftermath of the Clearances and its impact on the township and the community.

The poem shows that land is more than property: it is a source of sustenance, heritage, and identity. By addressing the Clearances through the Shetlandic voice, Bulter connects the local struggles of Shetlanders with the broader history of land use, ownership, and displacement.

## Author background

Rhoda Bulter née Johnson (1929–1994) was a writer, performer and broadcaster from Lerwick, the main port in Shetland. Following the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, Bulter moved to Lunnasting, a parish in the north of the Shetland Mainland, to live with her aunt. The two formative years that Bulter spent in Lunnasting, experiencing a rural and traditional way of life, left a lasting impression on her and inspired much of her poetry.

Bulter's first published poem, 'Fladdabister', was written in Shetlandic and appeared in *The New Shetlander* in 1965. As her creative career progressed, Bulter began writing and performing exclusively in her native tongue, championing the language that she had grown up speaking. She wrote for the magazines *Shetland Life* and *The New Shetlander*, and was often on Radio Shetland, which regularly broadcast in Shetlandic as well as English.

Bulter is considered one of Shetland's best-known and best-loved poets. Her poetry is celebrated for its vivid descriptions, humour, and deep connection to the Shetland way of life, landscapes, and traditions. Her influence extends beyond poetry into the cultural identity of Shetland, with her work being celebrated through initiatives such as the Rhoda Bulter Award, which alternates between visual arts and poetry inspired by her life and work.

## Publication details

'Da Clearance' features in *Hairst is Coosed: The Rhoda Bulter Collection* (The Shetland Times, 2014). Published posthumously, *Hairst is Coosed* contains all four volumes of Bulter's poetry – *Shaela* (1976), *A Nev foo o Coarn* (1977), *Link-stanes* (1980) and *Snyivveries* (1986) – along with a number of unpublished poems. It includes additional content such as line drawings by Bulter, music scores, and photographs.

Bulter recorded three CDs of her poems: *Bide a start wi me*, *Shetlandic* and *Caald Clods an Tinder*.

## Online resources

https://www.shetlanddialect.org.uk/rhoda-bulter features a short biography of Rhoda Bulter and a selection of her poetry in text and audio. A recording of Bulter reading 'Da Clearance', and an image of a town in Shetland before and after a clearance, are available here: https://www.shetlanddialect.org.uk/da-clearance

Da Clearance – Activity sheet on ShetlandDialect.org.uk includes discussion prompts.

https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poet/rhoda-bulter/ includes a biography of Bulter and a bibliography of her work.

**The version of 'Da Clearance' 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.)**

## 'Da Clearance'

by Rhoda Bulter

I can see da rüfs aa taekit, an da hens aroond da door;
Fok kerryin twartree paets hame, an rigs delled every voar.
Aa da lums ir reekin, an I hear da happy soonds
O peerie bairns skirlin, as dey play dem ower da toons.

I see eens sittin roond da fire, an twartree mair oot by;
Sookin infants at da breest, an weemen gjaan ta cry.
Da tochtfil, tried faces o dem at's lived ower lang;
Fractious bairns feytin sleep, an sensin somethin wrang.

I hear a lood, lood knockin, an da crump o monny feet;
Men's voices raised in anger, an da bairns start ta greet.
I see da fok aa hirded oot afore da laandloard's men;
An aa da bits a things dey hed, fired ower da briggy-stane.

I see da bare waas staandin, an aa da laand lie green;
Lang syne da fire wis slokkit, an monny a year is geen.
Noo dey aa hae equal portions o aert ta tak dir sleep.
Tell me, wis it wirt it aa for twartree extry sheep?

**Glossary**

**rüf**: roof | **aa**: all | **taekit**: thatched
**fok**: people | **twartree**: two or three | **paet**: peat | **rig**: a plot of land | **delled**: dug | **voar**: spring
**lum**: chimney | **reekin**: smoking
**peerie**: small | **skirlin**: laughing shrilly | **ower da toons**: over the fields

**een**: one | **oot by**: outside
**weemen**: women | **gjaan ta cry**: about to give birth
**tochtfil**: thinking a lot | **tried**: anxious, worried | **owre lang**: too long
**feytin**: fighting

**crump**: crunch | **monny**: many
**hirded**: herded (like animals)
**briggy-stane**: flat stone(s) before door of a croft house

**waa**: wall
**lang syne**: long ago | **slokkit**: extinguished | **geen**: gone
**aert**: earth | **ta tak dir**: to take their
**wirt**: worth

## Shetland and Shetlandic

Shetland is an archipelago in the Northern Atlantic that lies about 100 miles northeast of mainland Scotland. It is situated between mainland Scotland, the Faroe Islands, and Norway and consists of around 100 islands, 16 of which are inhabited. The population sits at around 23,000 and the community is tight-knit, with a strong sense of identity tied to the land and sea.

*Image: Shetland UK location map. Source: Nilfanion, licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0*

Shetlandic, also known as Shetland dialect, is derived from Norse, Scots, and English. The Norse influence from the now-extinct Norn language is due to the Viking settlement of the Shetland Islands from the 9th century. This influence persisted longer in Shetland than in other parts of Scotland, and shaped Shetlandic through vocabulary, phonology, and grammar. After the islands were transferred to Scotland in 1469, Scots

became the dominant language in Shetland. However, the Norse substrate remained strong, which distinguishes Shetlandic (and also Orcadian, or Orkney Scots) from other Scots dialects. As the language of the Church and schools, English influences have also shaped Shetlandic.

Today, Shetlandic vocabulary blends words of Norn origin as well as Scots and English words. Its grammatical structure is mainly English, but Shetlandic still retains certain patterns of speech inherited from its Norse and Scottish antecedents, features which are unique to Shetlandic and not found in other Scots dialects. Distinct variants in pronunciation means that, though there are conventions, there is no standardised way of writing in Shetlandic and there are many variant spellings.

## Crofts and townships

*Image: A restored 19th C crofthouse, Shetland Crofthouse Museum.*
*Photo by Rob Farrow, licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0*

A croft is a small area of agricultural land, often with a dwelling house and a share in communal grazing land. In the 18th and 19th centuries, tenant farmers (crofters) held crofts under a system where they paid rent – cash, labour, or produce – to the landowner. Crofting communities were close-knit, often organised around townships where crofts were clustered.

## The Clearances

Due to the demand for wool in the 18th century, landowners saw greater profit in raising sheep than in maintaining small-scale crofting communities. Many landowners evicted their tenants, whose families may have lived and worked on the land for generations, to make way for large-scale sheep farming. Evictions were often conducted brutally, with homes burned if occupants resisted.

In the Highlands and Western Isles, the Clearances led to the disintegration of the clan system, the loss of Gaelic language and culture, and a significant reduction in the Highland population. Many Highlanders were resettled to less fertile land by the coast. Others emigrated – either voluntarily or under duress – to North America, Australia, or other parts of the British Empire.

In Shetland the Clearances occurred during the 19th century and had a profound effect on the lives of the islanders. Some communities were forcibly removed from their homes, and the disruption of traditional communal land use led to social upheaval.

The time that Bulter spent in Lunnasting as a child would have exposed her to the impact of the Clearances. At that time, as today, the southside of the parish consisted of small crofts, many of which lay vacant.

## Full analysis

*Form and structure*

'Da Clearance' is divided into four quatrains, with each stanza comprising two rhyming couplets. This structure allows for a clear narrative progression, with the stanzas portraying the community's past through to the present day.

*Lines 1–4*

I can see da rüfs aa taekit, an da hens aroond da door;
Fok kerryin twartree paets hame, an rigs delled every voar.
Aa da lums ir reekin, an I hear da happy soonds
O peerie bairns skirlin, as dey play dem ower da toons.

Although the poem is written in the present tense, the opening phrase 'I can see' distances the speaker from the scene, as if the speaker is recollecting a time gone by. 'I see' and 'I hear' is repeated throughout the poem, serving as a narrative device that suggests the speaker is a witness to the events – perhaps through memories passed down from older generations. Repetition is a common feature in oral storytelling.

'Da Clearance' opens on a scene of rural life in a crofting township. 'Fok' has connotations of a traditional way of life; as a colloquial term, it establishes the speaker as connected to the community in some way. The people are sustained by the land: they collect peat (a natural resource found in Shetland and across the Highlands and Islands) to heat their homes and they dig the surrounding plots of arable land each spring to grow crops.

'Rig' relates to the 'runrig' system, a form of communal agriculture where land was divided into narrow strips (rigs), which were assigned to different families. This system encouraged a collaborative way of farming the land and sharing its resources: rigs were re-allocated periodically among families to ensure fair access to good land, and the lack of hedges or fences meant the land was farmed collectively. The system gradually disappeared in the 18th and 19th centuries as landowners began enclosing land for efficiency and therefore profit.

The image of 'da lums reekin' represents life and work in the township, bringing to mind people gathered around or tending to the fire. Chimneys are often associated with home and family life, which is also relayed in the 'happy soonds' of 'peerie bairns' playing in the fields, representing the safety and harmony of the township.

*Lines 5–8*

I see eens sittin roond da fire, an twartree mair oot by;
Sookin infants at da breest, an weemen gjaan ta cry.
Da tochtfil, tried faces o dem at's lived ower lang;
Fractious bairns feytin sleep, an sensin somethin wrang.

Stanza 2 takes place inside a croft house. Assonance, a feature of oral storytelling, adds to the rhythm of the stanza, the first line of which portrays members of the community gathered around the fire, as they would to listen to a story.

The image of pregnant women and feeding infants is another portrayal of domestic life. However, the sense of harmony present in stanza 1 is disrupted. Adjectives such as 'tochtfil', 'fractious' and 'feytin' emphasise the tension felt in the room by the adults, who appear to anticipate the events to come, and the children, who are 'sensin somethin wrang'.

By depicting a multi-generational community, Bulter draws attention to the impact of the Clearances not only on the lives and livelihoods of those who worked the land but also their families. The displacement of communities from ancestral lands meant the repercussions of the Clearances were intergenerational.

*Lines 9–12*

I hear a lood, lood knockin, an da crump o monny feet;
Men's voices raised in anger, an da bairns start ta greet.
I see da fok aa hirded oot afore da laandloard's men;
An aa da bits a things dey hed, fired ower da briggy-stane.

The repetition of 'lood, lood' heightens the tension alluded to in stanza 2, with the external sounds of knocking, feet, and voices representing an unwelcome incoming. 'Monny feet' intensifies the sense of danger from outside the home, signalling the defencelessness of the women and children inside.

The shift from Shetlandic to English in the first half of the second line represents the voices of the men sent to Shetland to evict the community from the land. Bulter reverts to Shetlandic in the second half of the line, returning to 'da bairns' inside to highlight the helplessness of the community as they wait for the men to gain entry.

The verb 'hirded' draws a parallel between the treatment of the community and the treatment of farm animals. They are stripped of their autonomy and do not have a voice. Landlords enforced the evictions yet were often absent from their estates; they were powerful enough to order others to do their bidding, highlighted by the presence of 'da laandloard's men'. This draws attention to the hierarchy of rules still in place today: while landlords can live anywhere in the world, crofters (on registered land) must live within twenty miles of that land.

‘Bits a things’ could be read in two ways. It may signal that the community owns little by way of belongings, contrasting the impoverished tenants to the wealthy landlord. What they did own would usually be items that had been cobbled together, items found on beaches, cast-offs which had been repurposed – literally bits of things. It may also reflect the disdain shown by the landlord’s men to the community, whose belongings are cast out of the home and treated as worthless. The physical act of belongings being ‘fired ower da briggy-stane’, a marker of the house’s boundary, symbolises the clearing of people from their homes and from the land.

*Lines 13–16*

I see da bare waas staandin, an aa da laand lie green;
Lang syne da fire wis slokkit, an monny a year is geen.
Noo dey aa hae equal portions o aert ta tak dir sleep.
Tell me, wis it wirt it aa for twartree extry sheep?

In the final stanza, the lack of human presence mirrors the rural depopulation following the Clearances. The croft houses survive but lie uninhabited; the surrounding plots of land are now green, indicating that they have been left to grow wild and are no longer harvested. The decision to include the detail of green is to contrast the detail of the peat, which, when cut, is black and when stacked turns dark brown after it dries. This links the green to the absence of the black and brown shades which in Shetland are a sign of the land being worked and homes having fuel for warmth, an image developed further in the following line, ‘da fire wis slokkit’.

The second line evokes the passing of time. The long-extinguished fire symbolises a way of life eradicated. It also alludes to the torching of croft houses during the Clearances. The speaker’s acknowledgement that many years have passed strikes a tone of lamentation for a people and place now resigned to history.

In the penultimate line, the speaker alludes to the imbalance of land ownership. Only in death has the community been afforded ‘equal portions’ of the land. A poignant image is conjured of the community returned to the earth in burial, having been removed from the land when alive. In the mind of the author, all graves are the same size.

‘Tell me’ functions in a few different ways. A colloquial expression, it changes the tone of the poem from a tale or reflection into a conversation, with the speaker addressing

somebody directly. Using a conversational phrase reinforces the personal tone of the poem to emphasise the emotional link between the speaker and the events, as if they are speaking on behalf of the community.

'Tell me' is also a demand. In this case, the speaker seeks an acknowledgement of the devastating impact of the Clearances on the township, its people, and their descendants. This is followed by a rhetorical question, which can be used to make a point or encourage the reader to reflect on a particular issue. Here, it draws attention to the significance of what was lost – livelihoods, heritage, and identity – for so little. 'Twartree extra sheep' represents the commercial gain that the tenant landlords valued over the lives of the community.

'Da Clearance' presents a transhistorical speaker who moves across time, witnessing the clearance of the township as if it were unfolding in an eternal present. This perspective reinforces the enduring trauma and cultural memory of the event, suggesting that its impact resonates in the present. However, in the final stanza, the speaker's direct intervention marks a shift, distinguishing the past as something separate and concluded. Here, the speaker acknowledges the weight of history but also asserts agency in shaping its legacy.

## Discussion Prompts

### Introductory

- What do you know, or what can you find out, about the Clearances? How does this historical background affect your understanding of the poem?
- What kind of place is described in the poem? How does the poet bring it to life?
- The speaker looks back on events that happened long ago. How does this sense of reflection shape the way the story is told?
- Which words or phrases stood out to you the most? Why?
- How does the structure of the poem help tell the story?

### Techniques

- How does Bulter use Shetlandic to convey a sense of place and identity? How did this impact your reading experience?
- What emotions does the poem evoke? How does Bulter achieve this through language and tone?
- What tense is the poem written in and why?
- How does Bulter use contrast to emphasise change in the community?
- How does the first-person perspective shape the reader's experience? Who is this person and where are they 'seeing' all this from?

### Themes

- How does the poem reflect issues of power and inequality?
- What do you think the poem is trying to say about home, land, and ownership?
- How does the poem convey the emotional and physical impact of eviction on the community?
- What do you think the poet wants the reader to take away from this poem? Do you agree with their message? Why or why not?
- What does the poem have to say about the relationship between money and death?
- Where else have things like the clearances happened? Where are they still happening? How are they remembered?

## Practice Questions

Look at lines 1–8.

By referring to **at least two** examples, analyse how the poet uses language to convey a sense of community. (4 marks)

Look at lines 9–12.

Analyse how the poet uses language to depict tension. (2 marks)

Look at lines 13–16.

By referring to **at least two** examples, analyse how the poet uses language to portray the impact of the Clearances. (4 marks)

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

NB. Poems that Rhoda Bulter's 'Da Clearance' 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
- 'Summit at Corrie Etchachan' by Nan Shepherd
- '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.