University of Glasgow

Scottish Literature in the Classroom

Scottish Poetry Collection for Higher English:

‘Thomas the Rhymer’ (traditional ballad)

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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 English. 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.

Teaching resource written by Rhona Brown. Thanks also to Jennifer Farrar, Maureen Farrell, Corey Gibson, Pip Osmond-Williams, Ronnie Young, and teacher colleagues across Scotland for their guidance and support.

Context

Poem overview

'Thomas the Rhymer' is a traditional Scottish ballad. It belongs to the vast collection of Scottish songs, known as ballads, which were circulated via the oral tradition of pre-literate medieval Scotland and beyond.

The earliest historical figure we can identify in the ballads is the main character of 'Thomas the Rhymer': Thomas Lermont of Erceldoune, who lived in the 1200s. The ballads circulated orally – being passed down through generations and communities by often female 'tradition bearers' – for centuries, and were collected and published by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors and editors, including Allan Ramsay (1684–1758), Thomas Percy (1729–1811), Robert Burns (1759–1796), James Hogg (1770–1835) and Walter Scott (1771–1832).

- Stanza 1 introduces the protagonist, 'True Thomas', the 'Thomas the Rhymer' of the ballad's title, thought to be thirteenth-century poet Thomas of Erceldoune. The significance of his description as 'True' becomes clear as we arrive at Stanza 14. At the start of the poem, Thomas is relaxed, as is the ballad's tone, but soon he meets a woman who attracts his attention. As the plot develops, the tone changes.
- Stanza 2 describes the lady with typical ballad imagery, which seems simple, but is loaded with meaning. She is well-dressed in fine fabrics and her horse is well-groomed, giving the impression that she is a wealthy member of the aristocracy.
- Stanza 3 depicts Thomas showing respect to the lady who he praises as 'thou mighty Queen of Heaven' on account of her otherworldly beauty. He bows, demonstrating respect for her apparent appearance as a noblewoman, reflecting contemporary values of chivalry.
- Stanza 4 shows the lady admitting that she is Queen of Elfland, who has come to visit Thomas. As the tone becomes less relaxed and more uncertain, we might question her motivations. Why is she here, and why Thomas? For reasons that will become clear later, this is the last time that we hear Thomas's voice in the ballad.
- Stanza 5 depicts the lady convincing Thomas to come with her to Elfland using repetition, which is a common feature of the ballads. As a test, she dares Thomas to kiss her, so that she can be 'sure' of him.
- Stanza 6 shows Thomas enthusiastically accepting the challenge, kissing the lady under the magical Eildon Tree, where he was lying at the beginning of the ballad. Ballads often feature a bargain, which is offered and struck: we see the lady's bargain with Thomas here.

- Stanza 7 has the lady telling Thomas that, now he has kissed her, he must follow her to Elfland, where he must stay for seven years, through good or bad. The tone darkens further, as it has done throughout the poem; it might seem that Thomas has fallen into a trap, but we are not yet sure of his fate.
- Stanza 8 depicts their ride to Elfland, where the emphasis is on the otherworldly nature of the lady and her horse, which runs faster than the wind.
- Stanza 9 repeats the imagery of the previous stanza – with repetition being a common feature of Scottish balladry – showing the characters leaving the real, living world and arriving in a desert, devoid of life. These small details create a tone of anxiety and anticipation as we question where Thomas will end up.
- Stanza 10 has the lady inviting Thomas to rest, as she promises to show him three wonders or marvels. This depiction emphasises the lady's supernatural, magical power as Queen of Elfland.
- Stanza 11 depicts the lady showing Thomas the first of three paths he might take. Here we see the first which, although it is thorny and difficult to pass through, is the road of righteousness, morality and integrity.
- Stanza 12 shows the second path, which is wide, broad and easy to travel. This is the path to wickedness, but we are reminded that many take this easy road, mistaking it for the road to salvation.
- Stanza 13 gives a third path or choice, away from the classic options of good and evil, into Elfland, where the lady and Thomas must go. The ballad challenges Christian assumptions that human beings are headed towards either Heaven or Hell, and offers a third way which is unknown.
- Stanza 14 depicts the lady silencing Thomas: he is told that if he speaks any words in Elfland, he will be condemned to stay there for eternity and never return to his earthly home.
- Stanza 15 represents the continuation of their journey via places where some earthly entities remain, but the most obvious, grounding things of nature – the sun and moon – are strangely absent, giving the ballad a dreamy, eerie tone which emphasises the ethereal and removes the certainties of nature and Christian morality.
- Stanza 16 darkens, both in what it presents and its tone. Elfland is dark and the rivers run with blood; we are told that all the blood that is shed on Earth runs into Elfland and through its waters. Here, we have an indirect comment on human cruelty and folly, and their consequences beyond ourselves.
- Stanza 17 shows Thomas and the lady in a garden, where she picks an apple from a tree and offers it to Thomas, giving him the power to speak only the truth. The imagery echoes the Garden of Eden of the Christian Bible, in which Eve takes an apple from the Tree of Knowledge, committing the original sin.

- Stanza 18 tells us that Thomas has become assimilated into Elfland, wearing green velvet like the Queen of Elfland and remaining there for seven years. There is the suggestion that he was allowed to return to his earthly home, but the abrupt and ambivalent ending of the ballad makes us question any 'happy' ending or resolution to Thomas's story.

In 'Thomas the Rhymer', we see Thomas being seduced and perhaps tricked by the beautiful Queen of Elfland. While Christianity teaches that we can choose either the path towards Heaven or Hell, 'Thomas the Rhymer' shows that human beings can be taken in other directions, away from either good or evil and towards the otherworldly and supernatural. Although the ballad echoes the Christian Bible and Christian teachings, it is ambiguous and ambivalent throughout. The tone changes from bright and relaxed to dreamy, eerie, dark and foreboding, but the 'lesson' of Thomas's story is indirect and not straightforward. Despite its depiction of a journey to the supernatural Elfland, 'Thomas the Rhymer' perhaps reflects human reality, in which moral choices are not always simple.

Image: Thomas the Rhymer by Katharine Cameron. From Thomas the Rhymer *(retold by Mary MacGregor, 1908), originally captioned 'Under the Eildon Tree Thomas met the lady'. The 'lady' here is Queen of Elfland. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.*

Author background

As with all ballads, the author of 'Thomas the Rhymer' is unknown. The ballads belong to a pre-literate period of Scottish literary history, where poems and songs were transmitted by word-of-mouth through families and communities as a form of entertainment and storytelling. They are the work of the ordinary Scottish people from the early medieval period onwards and, because successive generations would edit, adapt and change the ballads they inherited for their own purposes, they are the product of communities rather than one individual.

The ballads were a source of fascination to writers and editors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Scottish authors such as Burns, Scott and Hogg collected ballads from their communities, writing them down and publishing them in expensive collections for wealthy audiences.

Many critics have pondered on the pros and cons of the printing of ballads: on one hand, ballad editors have preserved an ancient Scottish song tradition, allowing them to survive and be studied; on the other hand, the living, oral tradition is effectively stopped and silenced by the act of publishing, which privileges one version of a ballad which would have had many versions in its ever-changing oral state. The editing of the ballads has been described as being akin to putting a pin in a butterfly: we can admire, analyse and understand it, but it fails to 'live' as an evolving piece of literature.

Publication details

'Thomas the Rhymer', like many of the Scottish ballads, emerged from the Lowlands and Borders of Scotland. Perhaps as a result of this geographical origin, ballads are often associated with borders and liminal spaces: those transitional, blurry lines between, for example, Scotland and England, good and evil, reality and the otherworld. They are likely to have emerged in the early medieval period, but they may have been in circulation before that: although the earliest characters that we can identify in the ballads belong to the 1200s, it is not impossible that earlier ballads existed but have not survived. Although ballads were a particular tradition in Scotland, their themes were often universal, focusing on the common experiences that all human beings share.

The earliest published version of 'Thomas the Rhymer' is in Walter Scott's collection of ballads and songs entitled *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802), taken 'from a copy obtained from a lady residing not far from Erceldoune, corrected and enlarged by one in Mrs Brown's manuscript'. Anna Gordon (1747–1810), later Mrs Brown of Falkland, was a famous ballad singer and collector; her collection formed the basis of Scott's *Minstrelsy* as well as Robert Jamieson's *Popular Ballads and Songs* (1806). She is also an important source for a key collection of ballads, Francis James Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882–98). Her versions of ballads were trusted by the period's collectors: it is her version of 'Thomas the Rhymer' which first makes it into print, and is the version we are using here. Gordon's pivotal role in knowledge of the ballads raises a gender question. Although she was credited for providing nineteenth-century editors with a wealth of ballad texts, she was largely erased from their printed collections. This mirrors the fate of original ballad producers and singers, who were often women known to us today as 'tradition bearers'. The domination of women in the production of original ballads can be contrasted to the domination of men in the printing and monetisation of the ballads.

Online resources

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SntueM1zGtw: Thomas the Rhymer, Storytelling at Abbotsford. This resource is produced by Abbotsford, the home of Sir Walter Scott.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mYyJ8pRdfYs: 'Thomas the Rhymer' sung by Scottish folk singer and collector Ewan MacColl (1915-89).

http://walterscott.eu/education/ballads/supernatural-ballads/thomas-the-rhymer/: 'Thomas the Rhymer' on the Walter Scott Educational Website.

https://eprints.gla.ac.uk/49733/1/id49733.pdf: Maureen Farrell, 'The Ballads of Tam Lin and Thomas the Rhymer: Transformations and Transcriptions', a paper delivered at the Poetry and Childhood Conference, 20-21 April 2009, at the British Library, London.

The version of 'Thomas the Rhymer' printed here and published on the SQA website is the one that will be used in exams, valid from session 2025–26 onwards.

It's helpful to be aware that ballads often have 'variant' versions with different words, lines, or verses. When searching online for 'Thomas the Rhymer', you may encounter some of the other versions of this ballad.

'Thomas the Rhymer'

(traditional ballad)

True Thomas lay on Huntlie bank,
A ferlie he spied wi' his e'e;
And there he saw a ladye bright
Come riding down by the Eildon Tree.

Her shirt was o' the grass-green silk.
Her mantle o' the velvet fyne;
At ilka tett of her horse's mane
Hung fifty siller bells and nine.

True Thomas, he pull'd aff his cap
And louted down low to his knee;
All hail, thou mighty Queen of Heaven!
For thy peer on earth I never did see.

O no, O no, Thomas, she said,
That name does not belang to me;
I am but the Queen of fair Elfland
That am hither come to visit thee.

Harp and carp, Thomas, she said,
Harp and carp along wi' me,
And if ye dare to kiss my lips,
Sure of your bodie I will be.

Betide me weal, betide me woe,
That weird shall never daunton me,
Syne he has kissed her rosy lips

All underneath the Eildon Tree.

Now ye maun go wi' me, she said,
True Thomas, ye maun go wi' me;
And ye maun serve me seven years
Thro' weal or woe, as may chance to be.

She mounted on her milk-white steed,
She's ta'en True Thomas up behind;
And ay whene'er her bridle rung
The steed flew swifter than the wind.

O they rade on, and farther on –
The steed gaed swifter than the wind –
Until they reach'd a desert wide
And living land was left behind.

Light down, light down now, True Thomas,
And lean your head upon my knee;
Abide and rest a little space
And I will show you ferlies three.

O see ye not yon narrow road
So thick beset with thorns and briers?
That is the path of righteousness,
Though after it but few enquires.

And see ye not that braid, braid road
That lies across that lily leven?
That is the path of wickedness,
Though some call it the road to Heaven.

And see ye not that bonny road
That winds about the fernie brae?
That is the road to fair Elfland,
Where thou and I this night maun gae.

But Thomas, ye maun hold your tongue
Whatever ye may hear or see,
For if you speak word in Elfyn land

Ye'll ne'er get back to your ain countrie.

O they rade on, and farther on,
And they waded through rivers aboon the knee,
And they saw neither sun nor moon
But they heard the roaring of the sea.

It was mirk, mirk night and there was nae stern light
And they waded through red blude to the knee;
For a' the blude that's shed on earth
Rins through the springs o' that countrie.

Syne they came to a garden green
And she pu'd an apple frae a tree;
Take this for thy wages, True Thomas,
It will give thee the tongue that can never lie.

He has gotten a coat of the even cloth
And a pair of shoes of velvet green;
And till seven years were gane and past
True Thomas on earth was never seen.

Glossary

All English definitions of Scots words are taken from the Dictionary of the Scots Language, available online at https://dsl.ac.uk.

ferlie: an unusual or strange sight; a wonder, marvel.

tett: a small lock of hair.

siller: silver.

lout: to bow or stoop.

carp: to sing.

weal: abundance, prosperity.

daunton: challenge.

weird: fate, fortune, destiny.

syne: afterwards; soon.

maun: must.

braid: broad.

leven: a field of grass; a meadow.

brae: hill.

aboon: above.

mirk: dark, black, gloomy.

blude: blood.

frae: from.

Oral tradition

Before the era of mass literacy, ballads were composed, memorised and performed without reliance on a written text. Other singers would then memorise and adapt the ballad, and it continued as a living, evolving thing which varied according to its singer and the location in which it was performed. The ballads had numerous functions in pre-literate Scotland: they were a form of entertainment, but they were also a means to preserve and gather a community's stories and histories. Many of the Scottish ballads focus on encounters between human beings and the supernatural, as 'Thomas the Rhymer' does, but others tell tales of individuals, families, communities, battles and wars. In this way, the ballads are important from a literary-historical perspective.

As outlined above, the original authors of ballads are now unknown. This is partly because of the way in which ballads evolve and develop across the years: rather than being the product of one author, the ballads are best understood as the product of collective authorship. They are sung and changed by many different performers across the generations, making the identification of a definitive ballad text difficult. This changed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when ballads were appealing to poets, collectors and printers as well as readers and were published in print editions for the first time by editors such as Ramsay, Percy, Hogg and Scott. Burns was a collector of ballads, which he tweaked and adapted before sending them to James Johnston and George Thomson for publication in their *Scots Musical Museum* (1787–1803) and *Select Scottish Airs* (1793). Both collections' core impulse was to preserve Scotland's ancient and modern song traditions.

The efforts of ballad collectors in this period are valuable as an act of literary-cultural safeguarding, allowing these ancient songs to be read and analysed by succeeding generations and preventing their extinction. But ballad editors also necessarily prioritised one ballad text over countless others, and were unable to represent the ever-changing life of a ballad in printed text. It has been argued that, before they were printed, ballads belonged to the Scottish people as part of a collective culture. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century editions in which they were published were aimed at wealthy readers, shifting the power away from ballad singers to ballad editors and publishers, and the tradition was harnessed for commercial reasons. Furthermore, those who authored and transmitted ballads in the pre-literate period were often women, known in ballad scholarship as 'tradition-bearers'. The central role of women in the production and collection of ballads was sometimes overshadowed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century editions produced by male scholars.

The Scottish ballads share characteristics which demonstrate their function in an oral tradition, including form, imagery and central themes. They are mainly composed in what is now known as the ballad stanza, a deceptively simple quatrain (four-line stanza)

with a rhyme scheme of ABCB. They often contain what looks like simplistic imagery including, for example, 'milk-white', 'blood-red' and 'grass-green', but certain colours had connotations for ballad audiences, allowing these apparently plain descriptions to carry additional meaning. Ballad themes are often universal – the big themes of life, including love, war, moral choice and death – making them timeless.

Ballads contain repetition, often referred to as incremental repetition, in which an idea, word or phrase is repeated throughout a ballad with incremental details to add excitement or anticipation of what comes next. We see this at work in 'Thomas the Rhymer', where key phrases such as 'True Thomas', 'the Eildon Tree', 'Harp and carp', 'weal' and 'woe', 'ye maun go wi' me', are repeated throughout the text to add tension, but also to propel the story and reveal new details. Incremental repetition was also used by ballad singers as a memory device, allowing them to remember the twists and turns of the story in long songs.

Historical context

Given that the ballads often originate from the border between Scotland and England in the early medieval period, they are frequently concerned with warfare between the countries in the Scottish Wars of Independence (1296–1357), which are associated with historical figures including William Wallace and Robert the Bruce, and the numerous battles which followed up until the Union of the Scottish and English Crowns in 1603.

Although 'Thomas the Rhymer' probably dates to the medieval period of Scottish history, it is not concerned with those national events, but with Thomas's (imaginary?) encounter with the Queen of Elfland. 'Thomas the Rhymer' is thought to have been a real person, and some have argued that he was the author of the ballad, but no evidence to support his authorship has survived. 'Thomas the Rhymer' is likely to be Thomas Lermont, or Thomas Rymour of Erceldoune, thought in various accounts to have been a knight, prophet or mythical figure. He lived in the latter half of the 13th century and, in the account of Henry the Minstrel, fought alongside William Wallace in the Wars of Scottish Independence.

There are references to Thomas in surviving sources. According to Scott, he lived and owned an estate in Erceldoune, now Earlston, near Melrose in the Scottish Borders. His mythical status was established by the fourteenth century, when he was known for his visit to Elfland, his inability to lie and his status as a prophet: his story is first told in print in an early Northern English romance entitled *Thomas of Erceldoune*. He is mentioned in Andrew Wyntoun's *Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland* (1426) as having the gift of prophecy, and makes an appearance in the 15th-century *The Actis and Deidis of the*

Illustere and Valeand Campioun Schir William Wallace, the historical epic poem by Blind Harry.

Full analysis

Form and Structure

'Thomas the Rhymer' follows the traditional ballad stanza, which consists of four lines with a rhyme scheme of ABCB. The ballad's story unfolds via narrative and reported speech; this is typical of the genre. The language and imagery are minimal and spare, with little extraneous description and no complex language; again, this is conventional for the ballads. This technique gives a text which appears to be simple, but close reading reveals deep, submerged meaning.

Speaker

The speaker/narrator is anonymous, and does not take an active part in the story. They introduce the story, report the speech between Thomas and the lady, tell and conclude the tale. There is no moral judgement in the speaker's storytelling: they simply observe and report events, without individual commentary. This device reflects the communal nature of the ballads: rather than being associated with an individual author, they are more concerned with shared experience. The passive presence of the speaker reflects the typical tone of the ballad genre, which is impassive, unsentimental and straightforward. In 'Thomas the Rhymer', the narrator does not analyse or explain the ballad's strange and supernatural events, leaving the reader (and listeners) to come to their own conclusions. While there are hints of a moral message in small details of 'Thomas the Rhymer', it is typical of the ballads in that it does not contain a 'lesson' for readers and listeners to learn, instead describing Thomas's adventure in a detached manner, without moralising or judgement.

Lines 1–4

True Thomas lay on Huntlie bank,
A ferlie he spied wi' his e'e;
And there he saw a ladye bright
Come riding down by the Eildon Tree.

We begin with the description of our protagonist, 'True Thomas', relaxing and reclining on 'Huntlie bank'. This is the first of a few mentions of apparently real locations in the ballad. Some can be identified, but caution must be exercised as the ballad author uses poetic license in their representation of place. Scholars agree that the real Thomas of

Erceldoune lived on an estate at Earlston, near Melrose in the Scottish Borders. Attempts have been made by various editors to identify 'Huntlie bank', and it has been associated with Huntlyburn House to the northwest of Melrose, the region's Dick's Cleugh and the nearby Huntlywood. We cannot be sure of the exact location of 'Huntlie bank', but is likely to have been near the Eildon Hills at Melrose.

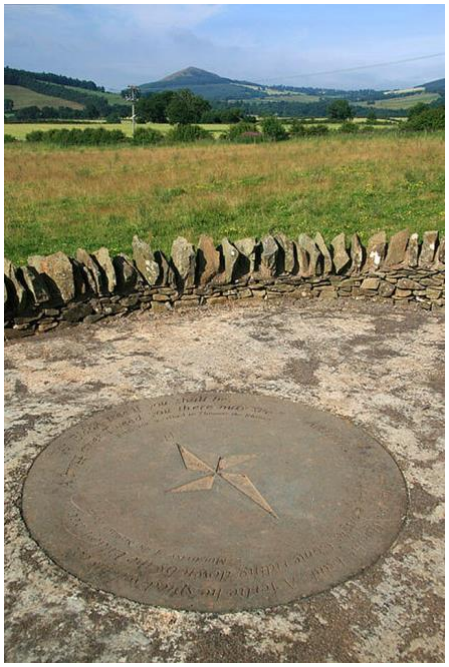

Image: Eildon Tree plaque. Photograph by Walter Baxter, licensed under CC BY- AS 2.0

The other location mentioned in Stanza 1 is the 'Eildon Tree', whose name recalls the Eildon Hills. There is little definitive information on this location. A tablet commemorating the Eildon Tree is at the roadside of the old A6091 road which is now inaccessible by car. If the Eildon Tree dated to Thomas of Erceldoune's thirteenth-century lifetime, it would not have survived until the twenty-first century; we can, however, deduce that of the ballad's action takes place around Earlston, Melrose and the Eildon Hills in the Scottish Borders.

At the ballad's opening, the tone is relaxed: Thomas is happily reclining in the countryside until his attention is attracted by a 'ferlie' or wondrous marvel. In the Scots language, the word 'ferlie' is often associated with the supernatural, so in that deceptively simple description, a submerged narrative emerges, which is maintained throughout the ballad and emphasises the danger of Thomas's situation. At this point, he sees a 'bright' and beautiful lady riding towards him and is immediately attracted to her; as the ballad develops, and depending on how we read Thomas's eventual fate, his attraction to her might be a dangerous mistake.

Lines 5–8

Her shirt was o' the grass-green silk.
Her mantle o' the velvet fyne;
At ilka tett of her horse's mane
Hung fifty siller bells and nine.

This stanza gives the first description of the lady who has caught Thomas's attention. She is dressed in fine and expensive clothes of silk and velvet, while her horse's mane is decorated by fifty-nine bells crafted from silver. The vision of the lady emphasises her wealth and beauty, and explains why Thomas is drawn to her. However, the ballad genre uses deceptively simple colour imagery to give warnings about the lady. The colour

most associated with her is green, the colour of nature and springtime rebirth. But green is also associated in the ballads with the supernatural. This simple, almost hackneyed description of the lady's shirt as 'grass-green' economically reveals a double message: she is associated with nature, but may also be dangerous in her association with the otherworld. As the ballad progresses, we see that these small, submerged signals have central importance to Thomas's story.

Lines 9–12

True Thomas, he pull'd aff his cap
And louted low down to his knee;
All hail, thou mighty Queen of Heaven!
For thy peer on earth I never did see.

Thomas treats the lady as he would an aristocratic woman: he doffs his hat and bows to show his respect, reflecting chivalric codes of behaviour in medieval Scotland. He 'hails' the lady, remarking that she must be the 'mighty Queen of Heaven' because she has no 'peer' on earth. Again, double signals abound. Thomas is instantly smitten by the lady's beauty, ignoring his recognition of her supernatural nature. Rather than associate her with Elfland, he demonstrates his Christian ideology by assuming she comes from Heaven. As the ballad continues, traditional Christian certainties are questioned and disrupted: we soon discover that the lady is the queen of Elfland, not Heaven, and she will offer him a third path as an alternative to the traditional Christian paths towards Heaven and Hell. Although we can understand Thomas's reaction to the lady, we might also question if he has been too easily seduced by her beauty and wealth.

Lines 13–16

O no, O no, Thomas, she said,
That name does not belang to me;
I am but the Queen of fair Elfland
That am hither come to visit thee.

The lady immediately corrects Thomas: she is not from heaven, but identifies herself as the 'Queen of fair Elfland', a supernatural place from which she comes to visit Thomas. At this point, Thomas, knowing her true identity, has a choice – to remain or to flee – but his ability to choose is fleeting and he remains infatuated by her beauty, despite her otherworldly origins.

Lines 17–20

Harp and carp, Thomas, she said,
Harp and carp along wi' me,
And if ye dare to kiss my lips,
Sure of your bodie I will be.

In many ballads, a bargain is struck between two characters which determines the story's path. Here, the lady presents a challenge to Thomas: if he dares to kiss her, she will be 'sure' of him. At this point, we are unaware of the meaning of this challenge, and why she needs to be 'sure' of Thomas in this physical sense. The kiss is a powerful device in ballads, fairy tales and folk literature: we need only think of the prince's transformative kiss in *Sleeping Beauty*. The imagery of the kiss shows that Thomas is about to determine his fate through personal choice. Perhaps knowing that Thomas is a poet, she repeats the command to 'harp and carp', showing the two sides of poetry in the period, encompassing music ('harp') and words ('carp').

Lines 21–24

Betide me weal, betide me woe,
That weird shall never daunton me,
Syne he has kissed her rosy lips
All underneath the Eildon Tree.

This stanza gives the first instance of Thomas's speech since Stanza 2; it is also the last time we hear him speak, as he is condemned to seven years of silence in Stanza 14. Thomas is undaunted by the prospect of kissing this beautiful woman, and vows to do so whether it brings him 'weal' (prosperity) or woe. Again, we might question if Thomas's choice is reckless, particularly as he knows the lady's identity; he also describes his decision not as a free choice, but as his 'weird' or destiny. At this early stage, Thomas's free will has been withdrawn and, sure enough, he kisses her underneath the magical Eildon Tree, which reveals itself as a portal to the otherworld. Thomas's voicelessness is significant: with the loss of speech, he loses agency and the ability to choose and react.

Lines 25–28

Now ye maun go wi' me, she said,
True Thomas, ye maun go wi' me;
And ye maun serve me seven years
Thro' weal or woe, as may chance to be.

There is confirmation in this stanza that Thomas is now the lady's captive and that he has lost his free will. Where there was choice, he now 'maun' (must) go with the lady, and is forced to 'serve' seven years in captivity; she ironically repeats his own vow to kiss her whether 'weal or woe'. The ballad's tone changes here, from relaxed and playful to foreboding. Those signals of impending disaster have been present from the start but have been submerged; from this point, they are overt. As has been the case from her first appearance, the lady is fully in charge, and Thomas is subservient. He was lured by a beautiful woman, and is now in peril: themes of gender dynamics and traditional portrayals of women as temptresses are present here.

Lines 29–32

She mounted on her milk-white steed,
She's ta'en True Thomas up behind;
And aye whene'er her bridle rung
The steed flew swifter than the wind.

This stanza offers more of the traditional colour imagery of the ballads in its description of the lady's horse as 'milk-white', a colour generally associated with innocence and purity. However, so far the ballad has trained us to distrust beautiful appearances, and encouraged us to look for the reality under surface appearances. Thomas is spirited away by the lady, whose horse has supernatural, otherworldly power as it flies 'swifter than the wind'. This is a conventional metaphor, but in this case it may not be metaphorical; it may represent the power of the supernatural.

Lines 33–36

O they rade on, and farther on —
The steed gaed swifter than the wind —
Until they reach'd a desert wide
And living land was left behind.

The horse continues at its strangely powerful pace, transporting Thomas 'farther on', away from his home and the reality of his earthly life. The signals of danger we have seen throughout the ballad continue, as the characters arrive in a broad 'desert' which is devoid of life. Thomas and the lady have left the natural world and have arrived somewhere unrecognisable. As is typical of the ballad, there is no narratorial comment on Thomas's journey and no reflection on its events. The reader/listener is left to come to their own conclusions about where Thomas is and where he is headed.

Lines 37–40

Light down, light down now, True Thomas,
And lean your head upon my knee;
Abide and rest a little space
And I will shew you ferlies three.

As if to emphasise their overwhelmingly long journey, the lady allows Thomas to rest, but only long enough to show him three 'ferlies' or marvels. Note that the word 'ferlie' has been repeated and repurposed here: first, it was used by Thomas to describe the lady's beautiful (and otherworldly) appearance; now, it is used by the Queen to show Thomas the three paths available to them. These paths have a function in the story, emphasising that Thomas will follow the lady on an unconventional path towards the supernatural, but they may also reflect the choices that we make as human beings and their potential consequences.

Lines 41–44

O see ye not yon narrow road
So thick beset with thorns and briers?
That is the path of righteousness,
Though after it but few enquires.

The first path shown to Thomas might be recognisable to readers and listeners familiar with Christian teaching. It is, according to the lady, the 'path of righteousness' and moral goodness. It is lined with thorny rose bushes and is difficult to pass; it is also deserted, because few choose it as their life's path. Although the moral comment is not overt, there is a message here that humankind has the choice to move towards righteousness, or 'Heaven', but many find the path too difficult, preferring to sacrifice their integrity for the easier path depicted in the following stanza.

Lines 45–48

And see ye not that braid, braid road
That lies across that lily leven?
That is the path of wickedness,
Though some call it the road to Heaven.

The second 'ferlie' or path is broad, easy to travel and access over a lily-strewn meadow. It is attractive, but is revealed as the 'path of wickedness', although people often

mistake it for 'the road to Heaven'. This is the second choice in a classic binary between good and evil: the first path (to Heaven) is difficult but leads to redemption, while the second path (to Hell) is easy but leads to damnation. The ballad therefore offers a comment on human beings and their choices, emphasising that most choose the easy route, mistaking it for the path to Heaven, when in fact they are heading towards Hell. Although the Queen of Elfland does not belong to the ballad's 'real' world of medieval, Christian Scotland, she demonstrates the realities of Thomas's earthly existence while reflecting Christian teaching.

Lines 49–52

And see not ye that bonny road
That winds about the fernie brae?
That is the road to fair Elfland,
Where thou and I this night maun gae.

While the Queen of Elfland is aware of the Christian binaries of good and evil and Heaven and Hell, she takes neither of these paths, showing Thomas a third way, which is 'bonny' and beautiful, towards 'fair Elfland' where he is destined to remain for seven years. The third path/choice is different from the others and is compatible with nature, just as is the lady in her 'grass-green' clothing. Like her, the road to Elfland is attractive and seductive, but the idea of a 'third way' beyond Christian teaching sound ring alarm bells in the ballad's audience. The lady lured Thomas with her beauty towards a world beyond his comprehension; the troubling journey to Elfland reflects his initial temptation and, depending on how we read the ballad, mistake or opportunity. We might ask: what are the opportunities and dangers of taking a third option, beyond the accepted binaries of good and evil?

Lines 53–56

But Thomas, ye maun hold your tongue
Whatever ye may hear or see,
For if you speak word in Elflyn land
Ye'll ne'er get back to your ain countrie.

In this stanza, we have the second 'bargain' of the ballad. The lady informs Thomas that, once he reaches Elfland, he will not be able to speak. If he utters one word, he will be condemned to live in Elfland for eternity, and will not be able to return to his earthly home. There is debate over how far medieval Scottish people believed in the supernatural. The supernatural world is certainly a prominent theme in the ballads, and

it does seem to be a preoccupation of the communities that produced and adapted them. Here, however, the consequences of Thomas's seduction by the lady are shown: he will see and experience a supernatural otherworld, but he must not speak. The ballad offers opportunities to discuss what happens when we deviate from accepted moral paths and when we involve ourselves in supernatural matters. The ballad remains neutral on these questions, simply reporting the events and allowing us to come to our own conclusions.

Lines 57–60

O they rade on, and farther on,
And they waded through rivers aboon the knee,
And they saw neither sun nor moon
But they heard the roaring of the sea.

This stanza demonstrates just how far Thomas has come from his earthly life. After riding for a long time and wading through rivers, the world Thomas now inhabits is eerie and unnatural. It lacks both sun and moon, those grounding, reliable features of the natural world, but the 'roaring of the sea' can be heard in the distance. This may imply that the supernatural is different from the earthly world but is closer and more accessible than we might assume. Again, the tone darkens, as we move further away from the world as we recognise it. The ballad might be literal, in that it represents an apparently true story about Thomas of Erceldoune: in 14th-century sources, it is accepted that he spent seven years in the otherworld. It might also be metaphorical: Thomas may have become obsessed with the supernatural, to the extent that he is absent from the physical world he inhabits. Again, the ballad leaves this question open.

Lines 61–64

It was mirk, mirk night and there was nae stern light
And they waded through red blude to the knee;
For a' the blude that's shed on earth
Rins through the springs o' that countrie.

There is tonal, physical and metaphorical darkening in this stanza. In Elfland, Thomas travels through the darkness of a pitch-black night as he wades through rivers of blood. This horrifying detail is explained in the stanza's closing couplet: all the blood shed on earth runs through Elfland's rivers. This depiction may reflect a contemporary reality, as well as a metaphorical meaning. Medieval Scotland was characterised by frequent warfare which resulted in the severe injury and frequent death of soldiers; it was a

commonplace of day-to-day life. 'Thomas the Rhymer' may reflect that reality, as it states that the blood shed on earth leads to knee-high rivers of blood in Elfland. It may also invite its readers and listeners to reflect on cause and effect, and the consequences of our actions. These consequences may not always affect us as individuals, the ballad implies, but they will be felt somewhere. Might we have a medieval anti-war message in this stanza of 'Thomas the Rhymer'?

Lines 65–68

Syne they came on to a garden green
And she pu'd an apple frae a tree;
Take this for thy wages, True Thomas,
It will give thee the tongue that can never lie.

While 'Thomas the Rhymer' has indirectly reflected Christian teachings throughout, this stanza is straightforward in its allusion to the Christian Bible, and it depicts the third and final bargain of the ballad. The characters arrive at a 'garden green' which echoes the Garden of Eden in Christianity's narrative of the origins of humankind. According to the Biblical book of Genesis, the first human beings on earth – Adam and Eve – lived peacefully in the Garden of Eden. However, when Eve is tempted by the serpent to pick and eat an apple from the Tree of Knowledge, she plunges humankind into original sin, meaning that all human beings are born sinners.

This stanza offers opportunities to discuss that Biblical origin story, but it is also rooted in Thomas's story. He is to be in servitude in Elfland for seven years where he must remain silent, and his 'wages' come via the metaphorical apple which, when eaten, prevents Thomas from being able to tell a lie. This penultimate stanza explains why he is referred to as 'True Thomas' from the ballad's first line: after his stay in Elfland and presumed return home, he is capable only of speaking the truth. This may also explain why Thomas is often represented as a prophet in contemporary literature. The ballad invites us to consider whether his 'wages' are proportionate to his seven years in Elfland. Is the inability to lie a blessing or a punishment by the Queen of Elfland? And why are the 'tempters' of this stanza – the Queen of Elfland and, by association, Eve – women?

Lines 69–72

He has gotten a coat of the even cloth
And a pair of shoes of velvet green;

And till seven years were gane and past
True Thomas on earth was never seen.

In this final stanza, Thomas has become like the Queen of Elfland, and is assimilated into her world. He is dressed opulently, just as she is in the ballad's second stanza and, like her, he wears green clothing, reflecting his closeness to nature and the supernatural. The ending does not offer closure. It appears that Thomas eventually returned home, but there is no mention of the recognisable locations of the early part of the ballad. It appears too that Thomas kept his word to the Queen of Elfland, and remained silent in her world for seven years.

There is no comment on Thomas after his return to earth or what became of him, again leaving this to the reader's and listener's interpretation. But this ambivalent ending does invite conversations about our actions and their consequences, what happens when we involve ourselves in the supernatural world, when we allow ourselves to be lured by beautiful appearances, and when we stray from the conventional paths of 'good' and 'evil'.

Discussion Prompts

Introductory

- ‘Thomas the Rhymer’ is a ballad from the Scottish Borders, a liminal space between Scotland and England. How does the ballad deal with the border between the natural and supernatural, and what might that border represent?
- What does the Queen of Elfland symbolise in the poem?
- What are the meanings and consequences of Thomas’s seduction by the Queen of Elfland?
- How can we read the ballad as a reflection of appearances versus reality?
- What does Elfland represent, as a third ‘path’ separate from the traditional Christian paths towards either Heaven or Hell?

Techniques

- How does the ballad structure help to tell Thomas’s story?
- How does the ballad strike you when it is performed, rather than just read from the page?
- What specific visual images stand out in the ballad? How does the imagery contribute to its progressively darkening tone?
- What is the role of the Scots language in the poem? How does Scots affect the tone and narrative?
- How does ‘Thomas the Rhymer’s’ depiction of Christian teachings differ from other texts you have read?

Themes

- Does the ballad remind you of any other stories you may have encountered? If so, what? And what do you think the connections are?
- What do Thomas’s actions tell us about the ballad’s worldview?
- How does the poem challenge traditional depictions of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ people and actions?
- What does the poem say about our choices as human beings and, perhaps most importantly, their consequences?
- Does the poem have a moral message? If so, what is it?

Practice Questions

By referring to **at least two** examples, analyse how 'Thomas the Rhymer' reflects the theme of appearance versus reality. (4 marks)

By referring to **at least two** examples, analyse how 'Thomas the Rhymer' responds to the traditional moral battle between good and evil. (4 marks)

By referring to **at least two** examples, analyse how the ballad's use of Scots contributes to its tone. (4 marks)

Analyse how 'Thomas the Rhymer' represents human beings' choices, actions and consequences. (4 marks)

By referring to this ballad and at least one other from the poetry collection, discuss how the authors explore the theme of relationships. (10 marks)

N.B. Poems that 'Thomas the Rhymer' might be compared with for the 10-mark question are:

- 'Composed in August' by Robert Burns
- 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' by Hugh MacDiarmid
- 'Summit of Corrie Etchachan' by Nan Shepherd
- '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.