Scottish Literature in the Classroom

Scottish Poetry Collection for National 5 English:

‘The Twa Corbies’ (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 National 5. 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 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

‘The Twa Corbies’ is a traditional Scottish ballad that functions as a memento mori, offering a stark reminder of death’s inevitability. Its themes of mortality, betrayal and nature’s indifference are filtered through an unsentimental lens typical of Border balladry.

The title shifts attention away from the central human figure of the poem – the slain knight – onto the birds themselves. The crows represent the natural world, which is indifferent to human pride or legacy and which exposes the transience of love and loyalty. Their dialogue shapes the story, with the ballad prioritising nature’s long perspective over that of human tragedy.

Image: ‘The Twa Corbies’, illustrated by Arthur Rackham for Some British Ballads *(1919). Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.*

- Stanza 1 sets a solitary, eerie tone. The speaker overhears two crows discussing where they are going to eat. This introduction to the crows as vocal beings foreshadows their uncanny role as speakers of truth.
- In stanza 2, one crow tells the other about a newly slain knight, which gives the appearance of romantic tragedy. However, the knight’s former glory and honour are shown to be meaningless in death as he lies unnoticed and unburied.
- Stanza 3 plays on expectations and strips away romantic illusions surrounding death. What should be symbols of loyalty (hound, hawk, lover) betray the memory of the knight by abandoning him, emphasising his isolation.
- In stanza 4, the crows plan to feast on the knight’s remains. Their practical focus on consumption and nest-building highlights the fragility of human glory: what was once admired or beautiful is now fodder for scavengers.
- The final stanza reflects on the knight’s broader fate, ending on a stark image of the wind blowing over his bones. It transforms the story of the knight into a universal elegy: grief is powerless against the anonymity of death and the relentless cycle of nature.

Author background

Like many folk ballads of its kind, 'The Twa Corbies' does not have a single, identifiable author. Its origins are rooted in the oral tradition, meaning it was shaped by the voices of ordinary people over time and preserved through oral storytelling until it was documented in the 19th century. The ballad is generally considered anonymous, as is typical for works of this nature, where the creator's identity has been lost to time or was never recorded. As no definitive author can be credited, its development is attributed to the collective creativity of the folk tradition rather than to an individual writer.

Publication details

'The Twa Corbies' likely emerged in the Scottish Lowlands or Border region – areas rich with ballad traditions – sometime between the medieval period and the early modern era (roughly the 14th to 16th centuries). The ballad's language points to its Scottish origin, but its themes of mortality and nature's indifference echo universal human concerns found in folk traditions across Europe. Its supernatural edge (talking crows as agents of death) ties it to older Celtic or Norse influences, where birds often bore omens.

One of the earliest printed appearances of 'The Twa Corbies' is from 1802 when Sir Walter Scott included it in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, a collection aimed at preserving oral ballads gathered from local singers and manuscripts. It is believed that the ballad predates Scott's version, perhaps by centuries, evolving through countless performances.

Scott's version cemented 'The Twa Corbies' as a literary artifact, and its inclusion in Francis James Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882–98) further solidified its status. Child catalogued the ballads by number – under each number, he grouped multiple variants of the same core story or theme, which shows how a ballad may have changed over time or across regions. 'The Twa Corbies' is Child Ballad #26.

Online resources

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TowNqnYP6Bc: Folk singer Hamish Imlach performs 'The Twa Corbies'. Recorded in 1966.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYfNgOuQ2Bo: a recording of 'The Twa Corbies', produced by Scots Hoose. The music was arranged and performed by singer-songwriter Alastair McDonald.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=aU3AluhXc9A: Writer James Robertson reads 'The Twa Corbies'.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5VB2_gl4Dg&t=21s: Poet Kathleen Jamie reads 'The Twa Corbies'.

Scots Poetry Resource Unit and Powerpoint (aimed at S3), produced by the Scottish Poetry Library.

Tobar an Dualchuis includes field recordings of different variants of 'The Twa Corbies'. The 'Item Notes' for each recording are useful for thinking about the passage of folk songs and ballads through oral tradition.

The version of 'The Twa Corbies' printed here and published in the SQA's 'Scottish Texts for National 5 and Higher courses' document is the one that will be used in exams, valid from session 2025–26 onwards.

'The Twa Corbies'

(traditional ballad)

As I was walking all alane,
I heard twa corbies making mane; — *corbies: crows or ravens | making mane: lamenting or crying*
The tane unto the t'other say, — *tane: one*
'Where sall we gang and dine the day?' — *gang: go*

'In behind yon auld fail dyke, — *yon auld fail dyke: that old turf wall*
I wot there lies a new slain knight: — *wot: sense*
And naebody kens that he lies there,
But his hawk, his hound, and his lady fair.

'His hound is to the hunting gane, — *gane: gone*
His hawk to fetch the wild-fowl hame,
His lady's ta'en another mate,
So we may make our dinner sweet.

'Ye'll sit on his white hause-bane, — *hause-bane: collarbone*
And I'll pike out his bonny blue een; — *pike: peck | een: eyes*
Wi ae lock o his gowden hair
We'll theek our nest when it grows bare. — *theek: thatch*

'Mony an ane for him maks mane, — *many a one for him is crying*
But nane sall ken where he is gane;
Oer his white banes, when they are bare,
The wind sall blaw for evermair.'

Oral tradition

The oral tradition refers to the practice of passing stories, poems, songs, and cultural knowledge by word of mouth rather than through written texts. Before widespread literacy and the invention of the printing press, oral storytelling was the primary way that communities preserved their histories and beliefs. Ballads such as 'The Twa Corbies' would have been memorised and recited or sung, often in public settings (such as at gatherings or around fires). Simple language, strong rhythm, and repetition are common features of traditional ballads, which were crafted to be easy to remember or perform.

The oral tradition is particularly important in folk literature, where authorship is often unknown or collective. 'The Twa Corbies' exemplifies the idea of collective authorship – it is the product of an evolving lineage of anonymous storytellers and singers who shaped and reshaped the ballad across generations, regions, and national boundaries. Its many variants reflect centuries of oral transmission, where each teller or community would have altered the piece to suit local contexts or tastes. This cumulative process creates a kind of transhistorical authorship – no single voice can be credited, but rather the ballad has been refined and preserved by a chorus of voices over time.

An English variant of 'The Twa Corbies' is 'The Three Ravens', which was collected in 1611 in Thomas Ravenscroft's *Melismata*. This version offers a gentler take on a similar premise, with a doe burying the knight, and demonstrates how oral retellings could diverge to reflect regional sensibilities or values. The darker 'Twa Corbies' might reflect Scotland's war-torn Border culture, where betrayal and survival were realities for many, while the English version softens the story in its display of Christian and courtly traditions.

Historical context

Historically, the Anglo-Scottish border was a region marked by centuries of conflict between England and Scotland. Its violence and instability may have informed the ballad's matter-of-fact depiction of death, with nature presented as an impartial force reclaiming the fallen. The fate of the knight reflects the precariousness of life in the borderlands during this era, where bodies might be left unclaimed after a feud.

In the medieval and early modern period, people lived closer to nature's rhythms, with less control over their environment than in modern times. Death and decay were visible parts of daily life. In the ballad, the knight's body returning to the earth mirrors a pre-industrial

understanding of ecological cycles, unfiltered by Romantic idealisation.

Crow symbolism

Image: 'The Twa Corbies' (1901) by Campbell Lindsay Smith). Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Crows are commonly associated with death, not just because they feed on carrion but because they're often seen in graveyards or battlefields. In many traditions, they're associated with liminality – the space between life and death, decay and renewal.

Characterised as figures of intelligence and trickery, crows (and ravens) appear in stories from across the world as otherworldly messengers, uncanny truth-tellers, or prophets/omens. Key examples include:

- The Celtic goddess Morrígan, who appears as a crow flying over battlefields and marks death's arrival;
- The ravens of Norse lore, who accompany the god Odin in their role as gatherers of truth/knowledge;
- In later interpretations of Cain and Abel's story from the Bible, a crow or raven buries a dead bird to show Cain how to inter a body and hide the crime of killing his brother. This paints the crows as grim instructors, teaching humanity its first lesson in mortality.

In the ballad, the two crows are pragmatic observers of death. While their tone is matter-of-fact, it is also laced with grim satisfaction as they revel in the prospect of using the knight's body for their own means. They embody a world where survival trumps sentiment,

a perspective rooted in their ecological role as carrion-eaters. The crows' speech carries a fatalistic message: their presence and their feast is inevitable. While humans craft narratives of love and honour, the crows wait, untouched by these illusions.

Full analysis

Form and structure

'The Twa Corbies' follows a traditional ballad structure, written in quatrains (4-line stanzas) with an AABB rhyme scheme. This departure from the more conventional ABCB ballad rhyme creates a sense of conversation. Ballads prioritise action and spoken exchanges over introspection and description, driving the story forward through events and character voices. In 'The Twa Corbies', the main narrative unfolds through dialogue to present a concise and focused tale of mortality.

Speaker

The speaker, an unnamed solitary observer, acts as a framing device. They introduce the situation – overhearing two crows speaking – but do not influence its direction, allowing the crows' dialogue to take over. Rather than moralizing, commenting on or questioning the crows' conversation the speaker simply observes and reports, creating a sense of detachment that enhances the unsentimental tone of the ballad.

The fact that the speaker doesn't return at the end to reassert a human perspective reinforces the sense that the crows' version of events is to be trusted. Their dialogue becomes the lens through which the story is told and finalised. The speaker's passive presence contrasts with the human instinct to mourn and honour the dead, supporting the grim fatalism of the poem.

Lines 1–4

As I was walking all alane,
I heard twa corbies making mane;
The tane unto the t'other say,
'Where sall we gang and dine the day?'

The opening line positions the speaker as a lone witness, a narrative device common in ballads to frame the tale as a personal discovery. The solitude of the speaker sets an eerie tone and mirrors the isolation that becomes central to the poem.

The crows 'making mane' is a grim and ironic setup – the speaker identifies the tone of their speech as mournful, yet their conversation reveals them unconcerned by human tragedy. What they are actually doing is relishing their next meal.

Although their conversational tone humanises the birds, their macabre question underscores their role as unsentimental opportunists. 'Dine' evokes a formal meal, which is ironic given the carrion they seek.

Lines 5–8

In behind yon auld fail dyke,
I wot there lies a new slain knight:
And naebody kens that he lies there,
But his hawk, his hound, and his lady fair.

The imagery of 'yon auld fail dyke' is stark, painting a lonely and desolate picture of the knight's final resting place. 'Yon' and 'auld' suggest a remote and weathered location, while the dyke – a turf or sod wall – presents a humble, natural barrier that contrasts with the knight's presumed nobility.

Image: Deil's Dyke on Dalhanna Hill, New Cumnock.
Photograph by Robert Guthrie, licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

The dyke also evokes the ultimate boundary – that between life and death – and can be read as a burial image, not quite a proper grave or mound but something that echoes it. Whilst a burial mound implies ritual and remembrance, the 'auld fail dyke' is incidental and indifferent, a place of neglect not sanctity. The knight lies 'in behind it', having already passed into the realm of the (forgotten, unnoticed) dead.

'New slain' indicates the death is recent and violent, implying a tragic end. Although the crows are aware of this grim scene, they reveal that nobody else is, which heightens the sense of isolation as the knight lies alone and forgotten.

'Hawk, hound, and lady fair' are traditional symbols of a knight's life: the hawk represents hunting and nobility, the hound loyalty and companionship, and the lady fair romantic devotion. They alone know his fate, heightening the pathos of the scene. This sets up a false sense of dignity or romance, with the following stanza undermining any sense of their eternal loyalty.

Lines 9–12

His hound is to the hunting gane,
His hawk to fetch the wild-fowl hame,
His lady's ta'en another mate,
So we may make our dinner sweet.

The crows' observations of the knight's companions dismantle the romantic veneer of chivalry or honour. The hound and hawk have returned to their natural instinct – hunting – which implies that they no longer guard or mourn their master. The knight's lady, who is meant to embody love or fidelity, has moved on, revealing the impermanence of human bonds.

Like the animals, the lady isn't granted depth or inner life; she's cast as a functional figure in the knight's narrative, one who easily transfers her role to another once he is unable to fulfil his. Likewise, the knight is reduced to his role in a fatal narrative: a figure whose social function is to fight and, ultimately, to die. His identity, like the lady's, is stripped of individuality. This mechanistic view of human relationships and roles – as if people exist to

fulfil symbolic functions – implies that once someone ceases to serve their purpose, they are forgotten and replaced, and the world moves on without sentiment.

The crows expose the truth in a detached tone: the knight is alone, forgotten, and the illusions he lived by (loyalty, love, legacy) mean nothing in death. His body is left exposed, allowing the crows to 'make our dinner sweet'. This grimly ironic phrase signals to the crows benefitting from the knight's isolation, which enables them to feast undisturbed. The cold practicality of their attitude contrasts with human expectations of loyalty and mourning.

Lines 13–16

'Ye'll sit on his white hause-bane,
And I'll pike out his bonny blue een;
Wi ae lock o his gowden hair
We'll theek our nest when it grows bare.

Nature's indifference to human life and loss is heightened in stanza 4, which employs vivid and grotesque imagery as the crows – devoid of sentimentality – plot to repurpose the knight's body for their own survival.

'Ye'll sit' reduces the once-noble knight to a feeding station, violating his dignity. 'Ye'll' conveys inevitability and the natural order taking over, while 'sit' is a prelude to feasting, a predatory rather than passive act. 'White' suggests the flesh has already been stripped or is decaying, an image of stark finality. 'Hause-bane' creates a skeletal visual that serves as a reminder of mortality's levelling effect: regardless of status, we all end up as bones.

'And I'll' shows the crows dividing their tasks in a systematic desecration of the knight's body. The verb 'pike' evokes a sharp, precise motion, akin to stabbing or digging, and conjures the image of the crow targeting a delicate part of the body. The alliterative 'bonny blue' paints a picture of beauty and vitality, which contrasts with the violent act of removing the eyes.

'Gowden hair' stands out against the decay of the knight's body, a trace of the knight's lost glory before being repurposed into something mundane. While a lock of hair might be associated with a lover's keepsake, the crows intend to use it as nest insulation – a

practical tool which strips the hair of its emotional weight. This repurposing of a relic into a resource is the final erasure of the knight's identity.

The division of labour transitions to a collective act – 'we'll theek our nest' – and conjures a practical and domestic scene. 'Grows bare' suggests weathering, a natural process of decay that parallels the knight's own state. It also points to the knight's descent from grandeur to utility – his once shining hair will now become a makeshift fix for a bird's shabby home.

Lines 17–20

Mony an ane for him maks mane,
But nane sall ken where he is gane;
Oer his white banes, when they are bare,
The wind sall blaw for evermair.'

Line 17 suggests the knight was valued, yet this human sentiment contrasts with his abandonment by his companions. The mourning of 'mony' is disconnected from his reality, symbolising the gap between memory and truth.

'Nane sall ken' circles back to 'naebody ken' in line 7 – which marked the beginning of the knight's obscurity – to seal his fate of enduring anonymity in death. This amplifies the tragedy from a temporary state to an eternal one. The progression from 'lies there' (line 7) to 'is gane' (line 18) mirrors the physical decay and the fading of his existence. Extending beyond the present into perpetuity represents a deeper loss, not just of life but of legacy.

'White banes' is a stark, skeletal image, while 'bare' reinforces the vulnerability and exposure of the knight's remains, suggesting a landscape where nothing shields them. The motion and sound of the wind, a symbol of nature's unstoppable force that outlasts human concerns, contrasts with the stillness of the knight's bones. 'Evermair' stretches the scene into posterity, amplifying the loneliness of the knight who lies in unmarked limbo, his story lost to all but the elements.

Discussion Prompts

Introductory

- 'The Twa Corbies' is a ballad from the Scottish Borders, a place historically known for conflict and hardship. How might this context influence the poem's grim view of human fate?
- What do the twa corbies symbolise in the poem?
- How is death portrayed in the poem?
- What do the hawk, hound, and lady represent? What do their actions reveal about them?
- What does the poem make you feel about human significance in the natural world?

Techniques

- How does the ballad structure help to tell the story?
- Why does the speaker disappear after the opening lines?
- What specific visual images stand out to you the most? How do these images contribute to the bleak or unsettling atmosphere?
- How does the use of Scots affect the poem's tone or mood?
- How does the ballad's depiction of nature compare to other texts you've studied?
- What difference does listening to the ballad performed make to your understanding of its meaning?

Themes

- What does the attitude of the crows tell us about the poem's worldview?
- How does the ballad challenge romantic or heroic ideas about knights?
- 'Nane sall ken where he is gane' – what does this line suggest about memory and legacy?
- According to the ballad, what can we know about death and what comes after? Should this inspire us to live differently?
- How might the poem's theme of nature's indifference relate to contemporary environmental concerns?

Practice Questions

Look at lines 1–6.

By referring to **one** example of language, explain how the poet creates a lonely or eerie atmosphere. (2 marks)

Look at lines 7–11.

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain how the poet suggests that honour and loyalty are fleeting. (4 marks)

Look at lines 12–16.

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain how the poet presents nature as resourceful and indifferent. (4 marks)

Look at lines 17–20.

By referring to **one** example of language, explain how the poet conveys the theme of being lost to memory. (2 marks)

By referring to this poem and to at least one other poem from the National 5 Scottish Poetry Collection, show how the poets explore important human issues. (8 marks)

NB. Poems that 'The Twa Corbies' might be compared with for the 8-mark question are:

- 'The Bonnie Earl o' Moray' (traditional ballad)
- 'A Red, Red Rose' (Robert Burns)
- 'Lochinvar' (Sir Walter Scott)
- 'Auntie' (Nadine Aisha Jassat)
- 'Little Girls' (Len Pennie)

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.