Scottish Literature in the Classroom

Crossover Short Story Collection

National 5 and Higher English:

Duncan Williamson's 'Death in a Nut'

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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 Crossover Short Story Collection for National 5 and Higher. Each guide provides contextual information on the story 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, narrative structure and literary analysis.

This version of 'Death in a Nut' was told by Duncan Williamson. Every effort has been made to secure permission. It is reproduced here under the terms of the SQA permissions arrangement. 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

Story overview

Jack, a boy in his early teens, lives with his mother in a cottage by the shore. When she becomes unwell, Jack's mother explains to her son that Death is coming for her. On the beach, Jack encounters Death and traps him in a nut, which he throws into the sea. His mother miraculously recovers, but the absence of Death causes chaos: eggs won't break, animals can't be killed, and pests overrun the garden, threatening starvation in their village and beyond. After confessing to his mother, who explains that there is no life without death, Jacks goes in search of the nut and frees Death. Grateful to be restored to full power, Death spares Jack's mother until she is an old woman.

Author background

It is important to note that Duncan Williamson is not the author of 'Death in a Nut' – the tale predates him by centuries and exists in multiple versions across different cultures and communities. Rather, Williamson is the storyteller or tradition-bearer of this particular version of the tale. His relationship with the tale and with its telling was shaped by his Traveller heritage.

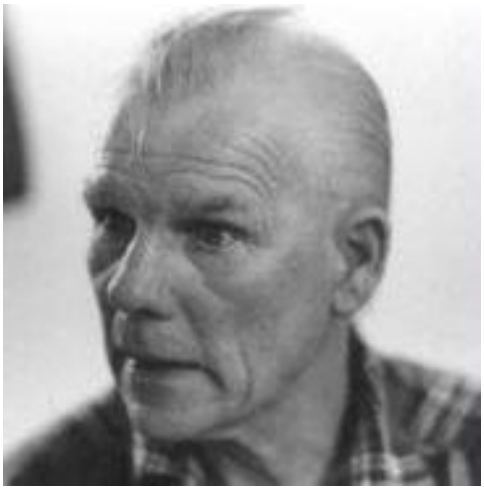


Image: Duncan Williamson. Photograph by Leonard Yarensky, licensed under CC BY-AS 4.0

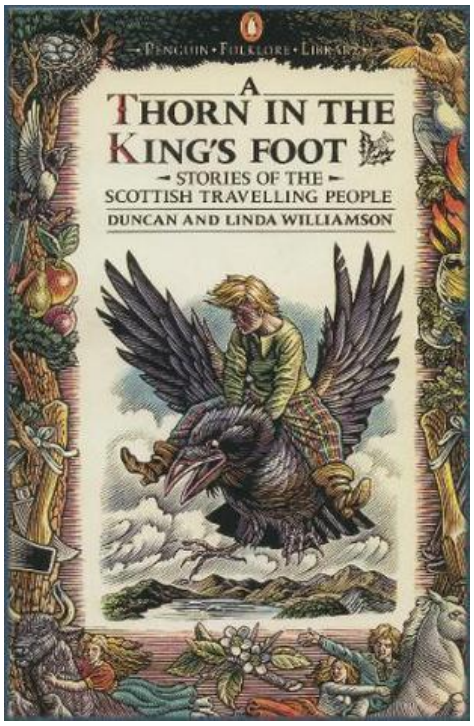
Duncan Williamson (1928–2007) was a storyteller and singer, renowned for his role in preserving Scotland's oral heritage. Born on the shores of Loch Fyne into a family of Travellers, Williamson grew up immersed in oral traditions, with his forebears on both

sides famed singers, pipers and storytellers. For fifty years, he travelled across Scotland, collecting folk tales and songs. Williamson gained international recognition as a storyteller, performing in schools up and down the country, and at festivals across the globe.

In 1980, Williamson moved into a farm cottage in Fife with his second wife, Linda, who recorded and transcribed some of his vast repertoire. The pair went on to publish numerous books of Williamson's stories, helping to preserve and promote Scottish Traveller culture. Scottish folklorist Hamish Henderson called Williamson 'possibly the most extraordinary tradition-bearer of the whole Traveller tribe' (*A Thorn in the King's Foot*, page 18), a testament to his profound impact on Scottish culture.

Publication details

'Death in a Nut' appears in *A Thorn in the King's Foot: Stories of the Scottish Travelling People*, which was published by Penguin in 1987. The named authors of the collection are Duncan Williamson and his wife, Linda, who recorded and transcribed the stories. In her preface to the collection, Linda writes about the pair deciding which tales to include:



"We decided that one criterion of inclusion should be a story's Scottish ethos, that folk outwith Scotland should sense the spirit of this particular nation in its content. Then, in line with the aim to represent good traveller storytelling we thought primary attention should be given [to] those tales which the travellers themselves consider *good stories*, or in cant [a traditional language spoken by Travellers], *barrie mooskins*.

What makes a story good to a traveller is its power to move him, its magical force. And the technical difficulties of communicating an oral story in print boil down to re-creating its aural power on the page. The oral folktale is like the folksong: both share a fundamental appeal to the ear; both owe their life to the human organization of sounds. In print, a story from oral tradition must stimulate the ear through the eye, and touch the other senses – in the reader's imagination – if it is to succeed with its *proper* force. This is the aim of my dialectal text."

(pages 9–10)

Online resources

Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches is dedicated to the presentation and promotion of audio recordings of Scotland's cultural heritage through its website and other projects. The website features a biography and over 200 recordings of Duncan Williamson, including a version of 'Death in a Nut' recorded in 1976. In this version, Jack is unwell and Death comes to him in a dream on his sickbed.

'Stories was wir education': a blog post by Paul Stanistreet that discusses Williamson's life and storytelling legacy.

The version of 'Death in a Nut' printed here and published on the SQA website is the one that will be used in exams, valid from session 2025–26 onwards. (The story itself is not covered by the CC BY-NC-SA license.)

'Death in a Nut'

As told by Duncan Williamson

Jack lived with his mother in a little cottage by the shoreside, an his mother kept some ducks an some hens. Jack cuid barely remember his father because his father had died long before he wis born. An they had a small kin o croft, Jack cut a little hay fir his mother's goats. When dher wur no hay tae collect, he spent most of his time along the shoreside as a beach-comber collecting everything that cam in bi the tide, whatever it wad be — any auld drums, any auld cans, pieces of driftwood, something that wis flung off a boat — Jack collectit all these things an brought them in, put them biside his mother's cottage an said, 'Some day they might come in useful.' But the mos thing that Jack ever collected fir his mother was firewood. An Jack wis very happy, he wis jist a young man, his early teens, and he dearly loved his mother. He used tae some days take duck eggs tae the village (his mother wis famed fir er duck eggs) an hen eggs to the village forbyes, they helped them survive, and his mother wad take in a little sewin fir the local people in the village; Jack and his mother lived quite happy. Till one particular day, it wis around about the wintertime, about the month o January, this time o the year now.

Jack used tae always get up early in the mornin an make a cup o tea, he always gev his mother a cup o tea in bed every mornin. An one particular mornin he rose early because he want't tae catch the in-comin tide tae see what it wad bring in fir him. He brought a cup o tea into his mother in her own little bed in a little room, it wis only a two-room little cottage they had.

He says, 'Mother, I've brought you a cup o tea.'

She says, 'Son, I don't want any tea.'

'Mother,' he says, 'why? What's wrong, are you not feelin —'

She says, 'Son, I'm not feelin very well this morning, I'm not feelin very well. I don't think I cuid even drink a cup o tea if ye gev it to me.'

'Oh, Mother,' he says, 'try an take a wee sip,' an he leaned over the bed, held the cup to this mother's mooth an tried to get her …

She took two–three sips, 'That's enough, laddie,' she says, 'I don't feel very well.'

He says, 'What's wrong with you, Mother? Are you in pain or somethin?'

'Well, so an no so, Jack, I dinnae ken what's wrong wi me,' she says. 'I'm an ill woman, Jack, an ye're a young man an I cannae go on for ever.'

'But, Mother,' he says, 'you cannae dee an leave me masel! What am I gaunnae dae? I've nae freends, nae naebody in this worl but you, Mother! Ye cannae dee an lea me!'

'Well,' she says, 'Jack, I think I'm no long fir this worl. In fact, I think he'll be comin fir me some o these days … soon.'

'Wha, Mother, ye talking about "comin fir me"?'

She says, ‘Jack, ye ken wha he is, Jack. Between me an you, we dinna share nae secrets — I’m an auld woman an I’m gaunna dee — Death’s gaunna come fir me, Jack, I can see it in ma mind.’

‘Oh, Mother, no, Mother,’ he says, an he held her hand.

‘But,’ she says, ‘never mind, laddie, ye’ll manage to take care o yirsel. Yir mother hes saved a few shillins fir ye an I’m sure some day ye’ll meet a nice wee wife when I’m gone, ye’ll prob’ly get on in the world.’

‘No, Mother,’ he says, ‘I cuidna get on withoot you.’

She says, ‘Laddie, leave me an I’ll try an get a wee sleep.’

Bi this time it was daylight as the sun begint tae get up an Jack walkit up along the shoreway jist in the grey-dark in the mornin, gettin clear. It must hae been about half-past eight–nine o’clock (in the wintertime it took a long while tae get clear in the mornins) when the tide was comin in. Jack walked along the shoreway an lo an behold, the first thing he seen comin a-walkin the shoreway was an auld man with a long grey beard, skinny legs and a ragged coat o’er his back an a scythe on his back. His two eyes were sunk inta his heid, sunk back intae his skull, an he wis the most uglies’-luikin creature that Jack ever seen in his life. But he had on his back *a brand new scythe* an hit was shinin in the light fae the mornin.

Noo, his mother hed always tellt Jack what like Deith luikit an Jack says tae his ainsel, ‘That’s Deith come fir my auld mother! He’s come tae take on’y thing that I love awa fae me, but,’ he said, ‘he’s no gettin awa wi it! He’s no gettin awa wi hit!’ So Jack steps oot aff the shoreside, an up he comes an meets this Auld Man — bare feet, lang ragged coat, lang ragged beard, high cheek bones an his eyes sunk back in his heid, two front teeth sticking out like that — and a shinin scythe on his back, the morning sun wis glitterin on the blade — ready to cut the people’s throats an take them away to the Land o Death.

Jack steps up, says, ‘Good morning, Auld Man.’

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘good morning, young man! Tell me, is it far tae the next cottage?’

Jack said, ‘Ma mother lives i the next cottage just along the shoreway a little bit.’

‘Oh,’ he says, ‘that’s her I want to visit.’

‘Not this morning,’ says Jack, ‘ye’re not gaunna visit her! I know who you are — you’re Death — an you’ve come tae take my aul mother, kill her an tak her awa an lea me masel.’

‘Well,’ Death says, ‘it’s natural. Yir mother, ye know, she’s an auld wumman an she’s reacht a certain age, I’ll no be doin her any harm, I’ll be jist doin her a guid turn — she’s sufferin in pain.’

‘You’re no takin my aul mither!’ says Jack. And he ran forward, he snappit the scythe aff the Aul Man’s back and he walkit tae a big stane, he smashed the scythe against a stane.

An the Auld Man got angrier an angrier an angrier an ugly-luikin, ‘My young man,’ he says, ‘you’ve done that — but that’s not the end!’

‘Well,’ Jack says, ‘it’s the end fir you!’ An Jack dived o top o him, Jack got a haud o him an Jack pickit a bit stick up the shoreside, he beat him an he weltit him an he weltit him an he beat him an he weltit him. He fought wi Death and Death wis as strong as what Jack was, but finally Jack conquered him! An Jack beat im with a bit stick, and lo an behold the funny thing happened: the more Jack beat him the wee-er he got, an Jack beat him an Jack beat him an Jack

beat him — no blood cam fae him or nothing — Jack beat him wi the stick till he got barely the size o that! An Jack catcht im in his hand, 'Now,' he said, 'I got ye! Ye'll no get my aul mither!'

Noo Jack thought in his ainsel, 'What in the worl am I gaunna do wi him? A hev him here, I canna let him go, A beat him, I broke his scythe an I conquered him. But what in the world am I gaunna do wi him? I canna hide him bilow a stane because he'll creep oot an he'll come back tae his normal size again.' An Jack walkit along the shore and he luikit — comin in by the tide was a big hazelnut, that size! But the funny thing about this hazelnut, a squirrel had dug a hole in the nut cause squirrels always dig holes in the nuts — they have sharp teeth — an he eats the kernel oot inside an leas the empty case. An Jack pickit up the hazelnut, he luikit, says, 'The very thing!' An Jack crushed Death in through the wee hole — inta the nut! An squeezed him in heid first, an his wee feet, put him in there, shoved him in. An he walkit aboot, he got a wee plug o stick and he plugged the hole fae the outside. 'Now,' he says, 'Death, you'll never get ma mither.' An he catcht him in his hand, he threw im oot inta the tide! An the heavy waves wis 'whoosh-an-whoosh-an-whoosh-an, whoosh-an-whoosh-in' in an back an forward. An Jack watched the wee nut, hit went a-sailin, floatin an back an forward away wi the tide. 'That's hit!' says Jack, 'that's the end o Death. He'll never bother my mother again, or naebody else forbyes my mither.'

Jack got two–three sticks under his arm an he walkit back. Whan he landed back he seen the reek wis comin fae the chimney, he says, 'My mother must be up, she must be feelin a wee bit better.' Lo an behold he walks in the hoose, there wis his auld mother up, her sleeves rolled up, her face full o flooer, her apron on an she's busy makin scones.

He said, 'How ye feelin, Mother?'

She says, 'Jack, I'm feelin great, I never feelt better in ma life! Laddie, I dinna ken what happened to me, but I wis lyin there fir a minute in pain an torture, and all in a minute I feelt like someone hed come an rumbled all the pains an tuik everything oot o my body, an made me … I feel like a lassie again, Jack! I made some scones fir yir breakfast.'

Jack never mentioned to his mother aboot Deith, never said a word. His mother fasselt roon the table, she's pit up her hair … Jack never seen his mother in better health in her life! Jack sit doon bi the fire, his mother made some scones. He had a wee bit scone, he says, 'Mother, is that all you've got tae eat?'

'Well,' she says, 'Jack, the're no much, jist a wee puckle flooer an I thocht I'd mak ye a wee scone fir yir breakfast. Go on oot tae the hen house an get a couple eggs, I'll mak ye a couple eggs alang wi yir scone an that'll fill ye up, laddie.'

Jack walks oot to the hen hoose as usual, wee shed beside his mother's hoose. Oh, every nest is full o eggs, hens' eggs, duck eggs, the nests is all full. Jack picks up four o the big beautiful broon eggs oot o the nest, gaes back in an 'Here, Mother, the're fowr,' he said, 'two tae you, two to me.'

De aul wumman says, 'I'll no be a minute, Jack.' It was a open fire they had. The wumman pulled the sway oot, put the fryin pan on, pit a wee bit fat i the pan. She waitit an she waitit an she watcht, but the wee bit fat wadna melt. She poked the fire with the poker but the wee bit fat wadna melt. 'Jack,' she says, 'fire's no kindlin very guid, laddie, it'll no even melt that wee bit fat.'

‘Well, pit some mair sticks on, Mother,’ he said, ‘pit some mair wee bits o sticks on.’ Jack pit the best o sticks on, but na! The wee bit o fat sut in the middle o the pan, but it wouldna melt, he says, ‘Mother, never mind, pit the egg in an gie it a rummle roon, it’ll dae me the way it is. Jis pit it in the pan.’

Aul mother tried — ‘crack’ — na. She hut the egg again — na. An s’pose she cuid hae take a fifty-pun hammer an hut the egg, *that egg would not break!* She says, ‘Jack, I cannae break these eggs.’

‘An, Mother,’ he said, ‘I thought ye said ye were feelin weel an feelin guid, an you cannae break an egg! Gie me the egg, I’ll break hit!’ Jack tuik the egg, went in his big hand, ye ken, Jack big young laddie, catcht the egg one hand — ‘clank’ on the side o the pan — na! Ye’re as well tae hit a stane on the side o the pan, *the egg would not break* in no way in this worl! ‘Ah, Mother,’ he says, ‘I dinna ken what’s wrong, I dinna ken whit’s wrong, Mother, wi these eggs, I don’t know. Prob’ly they’re no richt eggs, I better go an get another two.’

He walkit oot to the shed again, he brung in two duck eggs. But he tried the same — na, they wadna break, the eggs jist would not break in any way in the worl. ‘Mother,’ he says, ‘pit them in a taste o water an bring them a-boil!’

She says, ‘That’s right, Jack, I never thocht about that.’ The aul wumman got a wee pan an the fire wis goin well bi this time of bonnie shore sticks. She pit the pan on an within seconds the water wis boilan, she poppit the two eggs in. An it bubbled an bubbled an bubbled an bubbled an bubbled, an bubbled, she said, ‘They’re ready noo, Jack.’ She tuik them oot — ‘crack’ — na. As suppose they hed hae tried fir months, they cuidna crack that two eggs.

‘Ah, Mother,’ he says, ‘the’re something wrong. Mither, the’re something wrong, the’re enchantment upon us, that eggs’ll no cook. We’re gaunna dee wi hunger.’

‘Never mind, Jack,’ she says, ‘eat yir wee bit scone. I’ll mak ye a wee drop soup, I’ll mak ye a wee pot o soup. Go oot tae the gairden, Jack, an get me a wee taste o vegetables, leeks an a few carrots.’

Noo Jack had a guid garden, he passes all his time makkin a guid garden tae his mother. Ot he goes, he pulls two carrots, a leek, bit parsley an a neep an he brings it tae his mother. Aul wumman washes the pots, pits some water in, pits it on the fire. But she goes tae the table with the knife, but na — every time she touches the carrot, the knife jist skates aff hit. She toucht the leek — it skates aff it an aa. The auld wumman tried her best, an Jack tried his best — there’s no way in the world — Jack said, ‘That knife’s blunt, Mother.’

An Jack had a wee bit o shairpen stane he’d fand in the shoreside, he took the stane an he shairpit the knife, but no way in the world wad hit ever look at the carrots or the neep or the wee bit parsley tae mak a wee pot o soup. She says, ‘Jack, the’re somethin wrang wi my vegetables, Jack, they must be frozen solid.’

‘But,’ he said, ‘Mother, the’re been nae frost tae freeze them! Hoo in the world can this happen?’

‘Well,’ she says, ‘Jack, luik, ye ken I’ve an awfa cockerels this year, we have an awfa cockerels an we’ll no need them aa, Jack. Wad ye gae oot to the shed and pull a cockerel’s neck, and A’ll pit it in the pot, boil hit for wir supper?’

‘Ay,’ says Jack. Noo the aul wumman kep a lot o hens. Jack went oot an all i the shed dher wur dozens o them sittin i a raa, cockerels o all description. Jack luikit ti he seen a big fat cockerel sittin on a perch, he put his hand up, catcht hit an he feel’d it, it wis fat. ‘Oh,’ he says, ‘Mother’ll be pleased wi this yin.’ Jack pullt the neck — na! Pulled again — *no way*. He pullt it, he shakit it, he swung it roond his heid three–five times. He tuik a stick an he battert it i the heid, there’s no way — he cuidna touch the cockerel in any way! He pit it bilow his oxter an he walks inta his mother.

She said, ‘Ye get a cockerel, Jack?’

‘Oh, Mother,’ he said, ‘I got a cockerel aa right, I got a cockerel. But, Mother, you may care!’

She says, ‘What do you mean, laddie?’

‘You may care,’ he says, ‘I cannae kill hit.’

‘Ah, Jack,’ she says, ‘ye cannae kill a cockerel! I ken, ye killt dozens tae me afore, the hens an ducks an aa.’

‘Mother,’ he said, ‘I cannae kill this one — it’ll no dee!’

She says, ‘Gie me it ower here, gie me it over here!’ An the auld woman had a wee hatchet fir splittin sticks, she kep it by the fire. She says, ‘Gie it tae me, Jack, I’ll show ye the way tae kill it richt!’ She pit it doon the top o the block an she hut it wi the hatchet, chop its heid aff. She hut it with the hatchet seventeen times, but no — every time the heid jumpit aff — heid jumpit back on! ‘Na, Jack’ she says, ‘it’s nae good. There’s something wrang here, the’re something terrible gaun a-wrong. Nethin seems tae be richt aboot the place. Here — go out to my purse, laddie, run up tae the village to the butcher! I’m savin this fir a rainy day,’ an she tuik a half-croon oot o her purse. ‘Jack, gae up tae the butcher an get a wee bit o meat fae the butcher, I’ll mak ye a wee bite when ye come back.’

Noo, it wisna far fae the wee hoose to the village, about a quarter o mile Jack hed tae walk. When Jack walkit up the village, all the people were gaithert in the middle o the town square. They’re all bletherin an they’re chattin and they’re bletherin an they’re chattin, speakin tae each other. One was sayin, ‘A’ve sprayed ma garden an it’s overrun wi caterpillars! An I’ve tried tae spray hit, it’s no good.’

The butcher wis oot wi his apron, he said, ‘Three times I tried tae kill a bullock this mornin an three times I killed it, three times it jumpit back on its feet. I don’t know what’s wrong. The villagers run out o meat! I got a quota o hens in this mornin, ducks, an every time I pull their necks their heads jumps back on. There’s somethin terrible is happening!’

Jack went up to the butcher’s, he says, ‘Gie me a wee bit o meat fir ma mother.’

He says, ‘Laddie, the’re no a bit o meat in the shop. Dae ye no ken what I’m tryi’ tae tell the people in the village: I’ve tried ma best this mornin to kill a young bullock tae supply the village an I cannae kill hit!’

‘Well,’ Jack said, ‘the same thing happen to me — I tried tae boil an egg an I cannae boil an egg, I tried tae kill a cockerel –’

‘I tried tae kill ten cockerels,’ says the butcher, ‘but *they’ll no dee!*’

‘Oh dear-dear,’ says Jack, ‘we must be in some kin o trouble. Is hit happenin tae other places forbyes this?’

‘Well, I jist hed word,’ says the butcher, ‘the next village up two mile awa an the same thing’s happened tae them. Folk cannae even eat an apple — when they sink their teeth inta it, it’ll no even bite. They cannae cook a vegetable, they cannae boil water, they cannae dae nothin! The hale worl’s gaunna come tae a standstill, the’re something gaen terrible wrong — *nothing seems to die anymore*.’

An then Jack thought in his head, he said, ‘It’s my fault, I’m the cause o’t.’ He walkit back an he tellt his mother the same story I’m tellin you. He says, ‘Mother, there’s nae butcher meat fir ye.’

She says, ‘Why, laddie, why no?’

He says, ‘Luik, the butcher cannae kill nae beef, because hit’ll no dee.’

‘But Jack,’ she says, ‘why no — it’ll no dee? What’s wrang with the country, what’s wrang with the world?’

He says, ‘Mother, it’s all my fault!’

‘Your fault,’ she says, ‘Jack?’

‘Ay, Mither, it’s my fault,’ he says. ‘Listen, Mother: this morning when you were no feeling very well, I walkit along the shore tae gather some sticks fir the fire an I met Death comin tae tak ye awa. An I took his scythe fae him an I broke his scythe, I gi’n him a beatin, Mither, an I put him in a nut! An I flung him in the tide an I plugged the nut so’s he canna get oot, Mither. An God knows where he is noo. He’s floatin in the sea, Mother, firever an ever an ever, an nothing’ll dee — the worl is over-run with caterpillars an worms an everything — Mither, the’re nothing can dee! But Mither, I wad rather die with starvation than loss you.’

‘Jack, Jack, Jack, laddie,’ she says, ‘dae ye no ken what ye’ve done? Ye’ve destroyed the only thing that keeps the world alive.’

‘What do you mean, Mother, “keeps the world alive”? Luik, if I hedna killed him, I hedna hae beat im, Mother, an pit him in that nut — you’d be dead bi this time!’

‘I wad be dead, Jack,’ she says, ‘probably, but the other people would be gettin food, an the worl’d be gaun on — the way it shuid be — only fir you, laddie!’

‘But, Mother,’ he says, ‘what am I gaunna dae?’

She says, ‘Jack, there’s only thing ye can dae … ye’re a beach-comber like yir faither afore ye –’

‘Aye, Mother,’ he says, ‘I’m a beach-comber.’

‘Well, Jack,’ she says, ‘there’s only thing I can say: ye better gae an get im back an set him free! Because if ye dinnae, ye’re gaunna put the whole worl tae a standstill. *Bithout Death there is no life* … fir nobody.’

‘But, Mother,’ he says, ‘if I set him free, he’s gaunna come fir you.’

‘Well, Jack, if he comes fir me,’ she said, ‘I’ll be happy, and go inta another world an be peaceful! But you’ll be alive an so will the rest o the world.’

‘But Mother,’ he says, ‘I cuidna live bithoot ye.’

‘But,’ she says, ‘Jack, if ye dinnae set him free, *both* o hus’ll suffer, an I cannae stand tae see you suffer fir the want o something to eat: because the’re nothing in the world will die unless you set him free, because you cannae eat nothing until it’s dead.’

Jack thought in his mind fir a wee while. ‘Aa right, Mother,’ he says, ‘if that’s the way it shuid be, that’s the way it shuid be. Prob’ly I wis wrong.’

‘Of course, Jack,’ she says, ‘you were wrong.’

‘But,’ he says, ‘Mother, I only done it fir yir sake.’

‘Well,’ she says, ‘Jack, fir *my* sake, wad ye search fir that hazelnut an set him free?’

So the next mornin true tae his word, Jack walks the tide an walks the tide fir miles an miles an miles, day out and day in fir three days an fir three days more. He hedna nothin tae eat, he only hed a drink water. They cuidna cook anything, they cuidna eat any eggs, they couldna fry nothing in the pan if they had it, they cuidna make any soup, they cuidna get nothin. The caterpillars an the worms crawled out o the garden in thousands, an they ett every single vegetable that Jack had. An the’re nothing in the world — Jack went out an tried to teem hot water on them but it wis nae good. When he teemed hot water on them it just wis the same as he never poored nothing — no way. At last Jack said, ‘I must go an find that nut!’ So he walkit an he walkit, an he walkit day an he walkit night mair miles than he ever walked before, but no way cuid Jack fin’ this nut! Till Jack was completely exhaustit an fed up and completely sick, an he cuidna walk another mile. He sat doon bi the shoreside right in front o his mother’s hoose to rest, an wonderit, he pit his hand on his jaw an he said tae his ainsel, ‘What have I done? I’ve ruint the world, I’ve destroyed the world. People disna know,’ he said, ‘what Death has so good, at Death is such a guid person. I wis wrong tae beat him an put him in a nut.’

An he’s luikin all over — an lo and behold he luikit doon — there at his feet he seen a wee nut, an a wee bit o stick stickin oot hit. He liftit hit up in his hand, an Jack wis happy, happier an he’d ever been in his life before! And he pulled the plug an a wee head poppit oot. Jack held im in his two hands and Death spoke tae him, ‘Now, Jack,’ he said, ‘are ye happy?’

‘No,’ Jack said, ‘I’m no happy.’

He said, ‘You thought if you beat me an conquered me an killed me — because I’m jist Death — that that wad be the end, everything be all right. Well, Jack, ma laddie, ye’ve got a lot to learn, Jack. Without me,’ he said, ‘there’s no life.’

An Jack tuik him oot.

‘But,’ he says, ‘Jack, thank you fir setting me free,’ an jist like that, after Jack opent the nut, he cam oot an like that, he cam full strength again an stude before Jack — the same Auld Man with the long ragged coat an the sunken eyes an the two teeth in the front an the bare feet. He says, ‘Jack, ye broke my scythe.’

Jack said, ‘I’ll tell ye somethin, while I wis searchin fir you ma mother made me mend it. An I have it in the hoose fir ye, come wi me!’ An Jack led him up to the hoose. Lo an behold sure enough, sittin on the front o the porch wis the scythe that Jack broke. Jack had tuik it an he’d mend’t it, he sortit it an made it as guid as ever.

Death cam to the door an he ran his hand doon the face o the scythe, he sput on his thumb and he run it up the face o the scythe, an he says tae Jack, ‘I see you’ve sharpened it, Jack, and ye made a good job o it. Well, I hev some people to see in the village, Jack. But remember, I’ll come back fir yir mother someday, but seein you been guid to me I’ll make it a wee while!’ An Death walkit away.

Jack an his mother lived happy till his mother wis about a hundred years of age! An then one day Death cam back tae take his aul mother away, but Jack never saw him. But Jack was happy fir he knew *there is no life bithout Death*. An that is the end o my story.

Travellers and storytelling

The term Travellers refers to long-established, often nomadic communities in Scotland, connected through shared family ties and social networks, who have lived distinctively – moving through and alongside settled society – since at least the 12th century.

Storytelling serves as a living archive of Traveller history and cultural practices. Traveller stories tend to communicate specific values and beliefs, articulating the wisdom of the community. In doing so, these tales preserve distinct voices and worldviews in the face of historical marginalisation.

Those, like Williamson, who preserve and pass on stories, songs, beliefs, and customs of the community are celebrated for this social function. Working substantially in the oral tradition, they are deeply respected as living repositories of cultural knowledge.

'Death in a Nut' in folk tradition

The Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index (ATU Index) is a classification system used by folklorists to categorise and analyse traditional tales based on their narrative content and structure. The index assigns a number and category to recurring story patterns or 'tale types'. This helps researchers to track how stories spread across cultures, identify common motifs and archetypes, and study how oral traditions evolve over time.

'Death in a Nut' is classified as ATU 330B in the ATU Index. ATU 330 – The Smith and Death is a type of folk tale that centres on a smith (usually a blacksmith) who interacts with Death or the Devil in a story that explores mortality and the limits of human power. ATU 330B is a distinct variant that focuses on a character trapping death, usually to prevent the death of a loved one.

When recording 'Death in a Nut' in 1985, Williamson noted that he had heard many different versions of the tale,

> in the years when I used to travel among the travelling folk an was very interestit in telling stories an collectin stories roond the campfires; it is a very well-known story among the travelling folk … This particular version that I really like was told to me a long time ago by an auld uncle of mine who was married to my mother's sister, auld Sandy Reid … I'll try my best to tell hit tae ye as close to the natural way he told it to me as possible.

(quoted in *A Thorn in the King's Foot*, page 280)

Linda Williamson notes that in an earlier recording from 1979, Duncan Williamson had portrayed Jack as 'more argumentative and capable of stronger altercation'. One reason for the more docile Jack in the 1985 recording, which is the version that was later published, was audience: Williamson narrated the story for his youngest son, who was 6 years old at the time and had a less mature understanding of Death. (*A Thorn in the King's Foot*, pages 280–81)

In his introduction to *A Thorn in the King's Foot*, Hamish Henderson explains that Williamson's version of 'Death in a Nut' has 'deeper moral and philosophical implications than is general in folktales; the story spells out poignantly the universal tragic truth, human and animal, that there is veritably no life without death' (page 21).

Jack

Jack is a recurring figure in western folklore, but also emerges in stories from further afield. Exemplified in tales such as 'Jack and the Beanstalk', Jack is typically a young, cunning and resourceful everyman who navigates challenges through wit, luck and perseverance rather than brute strength or social status.

Image: Jack meets a fairy in Jack and the Beanstalk, illustration by Florence Liley Young (1918). Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

In *Don't Look Back, Jack!: Scottish Traveller Tales* (1990), Duncan Williamson explains that Jack is 'not one particular person' but rather 'a piece of everyman … a person's hero, built from a construction of storytellers' (page xiii). He notes that there's a Jack (or John) in every Traveller family.

In the Traveller storytelling tradition, Jack:

- is almost always either a young teenager or a young man;
- is never the older brother, always the youngest;
- never has sisters;
- lives with his mother, and his father is almost never present;
- never dies;
- is sometimes lazy, sometimes foolish;

- is never scared, always brave.

Language

The language of 'Death in a Nut' reflects the speech of Duncan Williamson, who grew up speaking Highland English and later acquired Scots when he began travelling. His Scots dialect does not belong to a single region; rather, it is an amalgam of features from different Scots-speaking areas, reflecting Williamson's nomadic lifestyle travelling the breadth of the country. It also carries some terms, e.g. 'bithout' / 'bithoot', in Scottish cant – the Traveller language, which is independent from Scots and Gaelic.

Full Analysis

Narrator

In oral storytelling, the narrator is a performative persona, which means a constructed identity or voice that a storyteller adopts during a performance. This persona is not necessarily the storyteller's identity, but a crafted role that is shaped by the specific demands of the tale being told. This voice is evident here, and returns us as readers to the story-telling event itself, which took place at a particular time of year, for example.

The narrator of 'Death in a Nut' embodies Duncan Williamson's personal storytelling style, but the voice is not solely his. Rather, it is a collective voice which Williamson channels through his performance, with many people having shaped the story over many years.

Narrative style

The narrative style of 'Death in a Nut' is characterised by:

- a conversational voice ('lo and behold')
- direct address ('the same story I'm tellin you')
- rhythmic repetition ('an Jack beat him an Jack beat him an Jack beat him')
- episodic progression (introduction, encounter with Death, domestic chaos, village crisis, quest, resolution)
- didactic tone ('there is no life bithout Death')

- emotional cues (describing Jack as ‘completely exhausit’ or ‘happier an he’d ever been’)
- humour (e.g. grotesque or absurd imagery, ‘an the head jumpit back on again an the cockerel run awa!’)

Lines 1–13

The narrator introduces us to Jack, a boy in his ‘early teens’. He is depicted as a dutiful son who helps to support his mother, a widow. The absence of a father figure shapes Jack’s responsibility as the male figure of the household. Jack ‘dearly loved his mother’, and their relationship is shown to be one of tender, mutual reliance.

Jack and his mother’s self-sufficiency (beachcombing and small-scale farming) reflects a deep connection to the natural environment. They live in harmony with nature’s rhythms, using what the tide brings and what the land provides (hay, eggs, goats). The location of the family house by the shoreside ties into Jack’s role as a beach-comber, a practical activity that shows he is resourceful and understands the potential value of discarded items.

The phrase ‘lived quite happily’ indicates their contentment, but disruption (‘till one particular day’) is foreshadowed. The mention of winter and January sets a specific temporal context, hinting at potential hardship. This setting is extended to the telling of the story as well as the events themselves. This brings the story closer to its implied audience.

Lines 14–43

The temporal marker ‘one particular mornin’ ties to the foreshadowing of ‘one particular day’ in the previous section, signalling the inciting incident: Jack’s mother’s illness. While Jack’s morning ritual of taking tea to his mother aligns with his dutiful character, his emotional response to her illness – panic, denial, and desperation (‘Ye cannae dee an lea me!’) – reveals his vulnerability and dependence on his mother.

Jack’s mother is pragmatic about being ‘no long fir this worl’. She faces her impending death with calm resignation. Her vague description of her condition (‘I dinnae ken what’s wrong wi me’) and refusal to dramatise her pain (‘Well, so an no so’) emphasise her stoic acceptance. She focuses on the reality of her decline rather than dwelling on its emotional weight. Her statement ‘Death’s gaunna come fir me’ is devoid of self-pity or denial. She

personifies Death as an inevitable visitor, reflecting a practical understanding of life's transience. By framing Death as a known entity ('ye ken wha he is, Jack'), she demystifies death and treats it as a reality to be faced.

The mention of 'a few shillins' saved for Jack offers tangible reassurance. In the context of their modest existence ('it wis only a two-room little cottage they had'), this small legacy reflects the mother's pragmatic planning within their limited means. Her hope that Jack will 'meet a nice wee wife' and 'get on in the world' is forward-looking, envisioning a path for Jack's future that offers stability.

The dialogue ends on a poignant note, with the mother's request for sleep leaving Jack facing the reality of her words. This shifts the focus to Jack's need to act independently.

Lines 44–93

The scene unfolds along the 'shoreway' at dawn, in the 'grey-dark' of a winter morning, around 'half-past eight-nine o'clock'. The rough timing and seasonal detail (winter's delayed daylight) create a liminal, eerie atmosphere. The incoming tide, a recurring motif, symbolises change as Jack transforms from a vulnerable son into a resourceful hero.

We are introduced to 'an auld man with a long grey beard, skinny legs, and a ragged coat', who we learn is Death. His appearance and clothes present Death as weathered by time, suggesting his long existence tirelessly performing his duty. His scythe, however, is pristine, 'shinin' – always functional and carefully maintained. This reveals the permanence and efficiency of Death's function: death is never delayed, never dulled.

While Death's shiny scythe symbolises his lethal power, his conversational tone ('good morning, young man') and his claim to be doing Jack's mother 'a guid turn' add complexity. He frames death as an act of good will to end suffering, which introduces a nuanced perspective that contrasts with Jack's absolute refusal to let his mother go.

Rather than relying on magic or divine aid, Jack's victory against Death is entirely human, using everyday objects to outwit a supernatural foe. The three-stage defeat follows a folk-tale pattern of escalating challenges. Jack's physical courage (fighting Death), quick thinking (breaking the scythe), and creative problem-solving (trapping Death in the hazelnut) embody the cunning of the Jack archetype. His use of a tide-delivered hazelnut links back to his beachcombing habit of collecting 'useless' items, repurposing what the

environment provides.

Lines 94–118

The scene returns to the intimate setting of the cottage, with the ‘reek comin fae the chimney’ signalling domestic normalcy and warmth. The bustling atmosphere inside the cottage (the mother baking and the fire burning) suggests that normal order has been restored.

Jack’s mother has transformed from a frail dying woman to feeling ‘like a lassie again’. Her miraculous recovery points to the immediate benefit of Jack’s victory over Death. However, Jack’s understated reaction to this turn of events might be read as a mix of relief and wariness. Perhaps he is beginning to realise the potential consequences of his actions.

The abundance of eggs in the hen house – every nest full of ‘big beautiful broon eggs’ – suggests a surge in fertility or prosperity. The end of Death has allowed life to flourish. However, not all is as it seems. Despite the mother’s efforts to stoke the fire, the fat ‘wadna melt’, signalling that Jack’s victory has disrupted natural processes. This foreshadows potential chaos, a common folktale consequence when heroes defy the cosmic order.

Lines 119–183

The conversation between Jack and his mother continues with increased frustration as the pair try to melt the butter and, having failed to do that, crack eggs. The focus on everyday tasks grounds the narrative in the practical realities of daily life, but the repeated failures create an eerie, surreal atmosphere.

Life persists unnaturally without death, its counterbalance. The disruptions – unbreakable eggs, uncuttable vegetables, unkillable cockerel – illustrate the chaotic consequences of eliminating Death. Jack remains the dutiful son, actively troubleshooting the household’s problems – adding sticks to the fire, attempting to break eggs, sharpening the knife, and trying to kill the cockerel. His willingness to adapt (boiling eggs, fetching vegetables) reflects his resourcefulness, but his failures highlight the limits of his control. Each failure compounds the household’s inability to prepare food, which transforms a minor inconvenience into an existential threat (‘We’re gaunna dee wi hunger’).

Fully revived after her bout of illness, the mother re-asserts herself as the household's experienced matriarch when Jack fails to kill the cockerel: 'I'll show ye the way tae kill it richt!' Jack's deference to her reflects a traditional family structure, where elders guide younger members.

The mother's acknowledgement of 'something terrible gaun a-wrong' alludes to supernatural forces, yet she responds practically to the crisis. Her decision to use her savings ('savin this fir a rainy day') shows her protective instinct in trying to feed the household, but also highlights their economic vulnerability, as the half-crown is a precious resource.

The repeated attempts to overcome each issue again follow a folktale pattern of three or more trials. The cockerel's surreal resilience ('heid jumpit back on') is a climactic moment, confirming the 'enchantment' that Jack suspects and pushing the narrative to external action (the trip to the butcher).

Lines 184–206

The narrative moves from the cottage to the village, a short 'quarter o mile away'. The communal setting contrasts with the isolated shore. The town square bustles with villagers 'bletherin an chattin', which creates a lively yet chaotic atmosphere as collective panic and confusion build. The scene transforms Jack's personal crisis into a societal one. The mention of villages 'two mile awa' affected by the end of Death suggests a regional – potentially global – disruption impacting farming, food production, and consumption.

The butcher's attempt to kill a bullock mirrors the mother's attempt to kill the cockerel ('three times I killed it, three times it jumpit back on its feet'). The grotesque imagery of duck and hen heads that leap back in place amplifies the surreal horror of a deathless world. Jack's conversation with the butcher reveals his growing understanding of the scope of the crisis. His question, 'Is hit happenin tae other places forbyes this?', shows curiosity and concern as Jack is confronted with the consequences of his actions.

Lines 207–247

Jack's realisation ('It's my fault, I'm the cause o't') marks a significant moment of self-awareness. The story returns to the cottage, which creates a quiet, introspective atmosphere that allows for emotional and moral reflection. Jack confesses, out loud for

the first time, that he is responsible for what's happened ('Mother, it's all my fault!'). The mention of the nut 'floatin in the sea, firever an ever' evokes the vast, uncontrollable tide, adding a sense of urgency.

Despite understanding the gravity of his actions, Jack is reluctant to free Death, who will 'come fir' his mother. Jack perceives the alternative reality, where his mother dies, as the worst possible scenario: 'I wad rather die with starvation than loss you … I cuidna live bithoot ye.' Here, Jack vocalises what the storyteller tells us in the opening paragraph: 'he dearly loved his mother'. Jack's emotional plea emphasises his vulnerability as well as his youthful naivety, demonstrated by his failure to anticipate the chaos caused by a deathless world in which an unbalanced ecosystem is 'over-run with caterpillars an worms'.

Jack, a young hero who acts from the heart, is juxtaposed with his mother, a wise figure whose moral clarity guides her son. The mother's willingness to accept her own mortality ('I'll be happy, and go inta another world an be peaceful') shows an understanding of nature's cycles. She insists that 'the worl'd be gaun on – the way it shuid be', emphasising her overriding concern for the collective good. Her explanation ('bithout Death there is no life') introduces a philosophical resolution which frames Death not as an enemy but as essential to existence.

The mother's instruction to Jack – 'ye better gae an get im back an set him free!' – is a pragmatic solution to the crisis, translating moral insight into actionable steps. Her reference to Jack's father ('ye're a beach-comber like yir faither afore ye') suggests that the family legacy of resourcefulness is not only practical but also carries a moral imperative to act responsibly. This adds emotional weight to Jack's task as he agrees to retrieve the nut.

Jack's decision speaks to the theme of balance, a return to the natural order, and Jack's place within it. To free Death Jack must embrace his daily work as a beachcomber, an act that suggests saving the world doesn't require grand gestures but can be achieved by faithfully performing one's everyday duties.

Lines 248–286

Jack returns to the shoreline and 'walks the tide an walks the tide fir miles an miles an miles … he walkit and he walkit, an he walkit day an he walkit night'. The repetitive phrasing emphasises Jack's perseverance and desperation, committed to righting his wrong.

It is worth noting that, before Jack sets off, his attempt to kill the caterpillars with boiling water indicates his belief that he might still be able to fix the immediate problem (loss of vegetables) without confronting the root cause (Death's imprisonment). This suggests that he is still wrestling with his decision to free Death.

Once Jack understands 'at last' that 'I must go an find that nut!', his physical journey parallels an internal one. His despairing reflection, 'I've ruint the world', reveals deep remorse, while his proactive repair of Death's scythe demonstrates accountability, albeit as an act driven by his mother. Note that Jack's earlier reflection, 'Prob'ly I wis wrong' (line 244), evolves into a full acknowledgement of his error: 'I wis wrong tae beat [Death] an put him in a nut'. This marks a significant character development, facilitated by Jack's gruelling journey.

Jack's serendipitous discovery of the nut 'at his feet' just as he has taken full responsibility for his actions follows folk-tale logic where perseverance is rewarded, often with an element of chance. At this point, Death re-emerges as a complex figure, neither villain nor hero. The whimsical description of his 'wee head [that] poppit oot' of the nut aligns with the idea that Death is not to be feared, despite the folkloric menace of his 'long ragged coat an the sunken eyes an the two teeth in the front'.

Death's statement, that 'Without me, there's no life', echoes the mother's words earlier in the story and affirms his role as a necessary force. His gratitude ('thank you fir setting me free') and leniency ('I'll make it a wee while') humanise Death, who understands that Jack's actions came from a place of youthful naivety. His comment 'ye've got a lot to learn, Jack' emphasises the ordinariness of Jack – an everyman – by acknowledging his inexperience. This frames the tale as a coming-of-age lesson about navigating life's big questions – particularly the interplay of life, death, and the natural order – while reassuring young audiences that facing these questions with courage and humility mitigates fear.

Returning to the contented atmosphere of the opening paragraph, 'Jack and his mother lived happy', with Death sparing the mother until she 'wis about a hundred years of age'. The understated description of Death's return – 'Death cam back tae take his aul mother away, but Jack never saw him' – conveys an inevitable passing devoid of fear or conflict. The absence of drama and Jack's unawareness soften the mood, suggesting death's natural integration into life. The final reiteration of 'there is no life bithout Death' reinforces the tale's lesson.

Discussion Prompts

Introductory

- Jack is an everyman who uses cunning rather than strength to solve problems. How does he compare to other heroes you know from books or films?
- What do you think Jack's actions reveal about his character?
- Can you think of other examples of stories or experiences that contain a similar message (about the relationship between life and death)?
- How does this version of the tale reflect Williamson's Traveller heritage? How might this story differ when told in another cultural or historical context?
- Why do you think storytelling is important for different communities?

Techniques

- How does the story reflect an oral tradition?
- What details help you to imagine the actual story-telling event that this text represents? How do you imagine that telling?
- How does the setting of the story contribute to its effects?
- The story unfolds in episodes – how does this structure make the story easier to follow or perform? If you were telling the story, which episode would you choose to emphasise and why?
- How does the narrator shape the story's tone or mood? What gestures or expressions might a storyteller use to perform this story?

Themes

- In the story Death is not evil but necessary for life's balance. What symbols in the story can you identify that reinforce the idea of balance?
- Think about the butter that won't melt, the vegetables that can't be cut, and the animals that can't be slaughtered. If you were to add to the story, what other examples might you add to this life without death?
- How does the story reflect the idea of natural cycles? What does it teach us about respecting natural cycles in our own world?
- What family values or dynamics are revealed through the relationship between Jack and his mother? How does family motivate actions, good and bad, in the story?

- What does the story suggest about trying to escape loss or grief?
- How does the story explore the theme of sacrifice?

Practice Questions

Note that 2- and 4-mark exam questions will refer to specific excerpts. The practice questions below have been written with the whole story in mind. They can be applied to a given excerpt or to the whole story.

National 5 Questions

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain what we learn about the relationship between Jack and his mother. (4 marks)

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain how the writer characterises Death. (4 marks)

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain how the writer conveys the villagers' sense of confusion and panic. (4 marks)

By referring to this story and to at least one other from the short story collection, show how setting is an important feature. (8 marks)

Higher Questions

By referring to **at least two** examples, analyse how the writer's use of language conveys Jack's resourcefulness. (4 marks)

Analyse how the writer's use of language builds suspense. (2 marks)

By referring to **at least two** examples, analyse how the writer's use of language conveys the consequences of delaying or controlling death. (4 marks)

By referring to this story and to at least one other from the short story collection, discuss how the writers use relationships to explore central concerns. (10 marks)

NB. Stories that Duncan Williamson's 'Death in a Nut' might be compared with for the 8-mark question (National 5) or the 10-mark question (Higher) are:

- 'Things My Wife and I Found Hidden in Our House' by Kirsty Logan
- 'Andrina' by George Mackay Brown
- 'A Voice Spoke to Me at Night' by Helen McClory

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.