

A Christmas Poem, by Josephine Neill

A caald winter's nicht
Starn heich in the lift
A lass wi a bairnie
Ahint a snaa drift.

Come in through the byre
Step ower the straw
Draw ben tae the fire
Afore the day daw.

The bairnie will sleep
By the peat's puttrin flame
Oor waarmin place, lassie,
This nicht is your hame.

Come morning the snaa
Showed nae fuitprints at aa
Tho the lass wi the bairnie
Had stolen awaa.

An we mynded anither
A lang while afore
Wi a bairn in her airms
An the beasts roun the door.

Learning Resources

Josephine Neill originates from Ayrshire and taught in Ayrshire and Dumfries. She says of the poem:

‘What makes it particularly Scots is the underlying Celtic motif of Christ - the unseen guest.’

The first stanza is nothing more than an impression of the scene. In the second and third there is the voice of ancient Scottish hospitality. By stanza four the strangers have gone without trace. Was it an imagined visitation? The voice in stanza five could be that of stanzas two and three, or it could be the voice of any of us, reminded of Mary with the Christ child in her arms, homeless, on the first Christmas.

Before Reading

Discuss: What do you know about the Christmas story?

What does Christmas mean to you?

After reading

Task 1

Make a list of all of the Scots words and phrases you can think of to describe winter weather.

Task 2

Write down the answers to the following questions:

- A) Who is the lass?
- B) Where does she come from?
- C) Where is she going?

Analysis

Write down the answers to the following questions:

- A) Which phrase in the first verse makes you think specifically of Christmas rather than winter? Why does it do so this?
- B) How does the poet achieve the atmosphere of the byre contrasted with the caald winter's nicht outside? Remember, contrast is when a writer highlights the differences between two or more things or ideas.
- C) Which words do you think best describe the lass? Choose from:
invisible mysterious unknown quiet strange friendly
- D) Give reasons for your answers.
- E) Look again at the line: 'Tho the lass wi the bairnie / Had stolen awaa'
- F) What does this mean?

Writing

Task:

Choose one of the following writing activities, using Scots.

- A) Write a modern version of the nativity story.
- B) Write a story titled 'The Legend of the Lass' developing the idea of this strange visitor.
- C) Write a poem or story depicting the atmosphere of your own home at Christmas time.
- D) Imagine you are one of the 'beasts roun the door'. Write a passage describing the scene from the beast's point of view.