

WEEK ONE

Ní Dhomhnaill, Nuala. 2007. *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*. English translation by Paul Muldoon. Loughcrew, Oldcastle, Co. Meath: The Gallery Press.

Selected poems for this course: “Founding Myth”, “The Mermaid in the Hospital”, “Lack of Sympathy”, “The Mermaid and Certain Words”, “A Remarkable Admission”, “Our Mermaid Goes Under Again”.

KEY IDEAS ABOUT THE POEMS

The Fifty Minute Mermaid is a bilingual collection of poems with an original version in (Gaelic) Irish by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and an English translation by the Irish poet Paul Muldoon. Published together, this edition may be seen as the manifestation of the linguistic division that has resulted from British colonization. However, the bilingual, collaborative edition can also be seen as an effort to bridge the gap between the English-language and the Irish-language traditions in Ireland.

The general THEME of the book is the denunciation of the loss of Gaelic culture and its language. The mermaid is an allegory of that Gaelic world which has been forcefully assimilated to English culture.

N.B. I will provide some examples here, but I do not expect you to reproduce the same ones in the exam. You should be able to find your own examples.

1. “Founding Myth”

Theme: Displacement: a series of narratives that attempt to explain how the merfolk were forced out of their habitat (the world under wave) and were made to live on dry land.

Structure: Part 1: 1st stanza (the merfolk do not remember the reason for the displacement). Part 2: stanzas 2, 3 and 4 (narratives of the merfolk’s displacement; Biblical narratives connected with the conversion of the Irish to Christianity in the 5th century –the Irish were pagan before and had Celtic gods). Part 3: stanza 5 (the speaker/narrator gives his/her personal opinion about these narratives and their credibility).

Imagery (choose one remarkable example and comment on it): The merfolk as an allegory of the Gaelic-Celtic people and culture.

Lineation (choose one remarkable example and comment on it): Lineation considers the tensions between the syntactic unit (the sentence) and the poetic unit (the line). Analyse the types of line breaks and enjambments.

The lines are longer in the English version (and often have to continue on the following line) because Irish seems to be more compact.

Differentiate long lines that need to continue on the following line (e.g. l. 5) from enjambments (e.g. ll. 1-4).

The first line of the poem: “Most of the merfolk” clearly identifies the protagonists of the book by splitting subject and verb (enjambment between 1st and 2nd lines).

A line break is a pause that entails some kind of intrigue about what will happen next.

Sound patterns (choose one remarkable example and comment on it): Both in the Irish and in the English versions of l. 1, we notice the repetition of the /m/ sound: “Most of the merfolk”, thereby stressing the significance of these protagonist creatures.

2. “The Mermaid in the Hospital”

Theme: Assimilation of the merfolk creatures to human form. Excision and graft of body organs.

Structure. One possible way to understand the structure of this poem is as follows: Part 1: Stanzas 1-3. The mermaid wakes up in the hospital to find her fishtail removed and two legs attached to her body, although she does not know what they are for. Part 2: Stanzas 3-4. The mermaid is told about the surgery that has been practised on her and is deeply affected by the physical change.

Imagery: When the mermaid speaks, she makes use of colloquial, (dead) metaphors: “taking the piss”, “legless with drink”. They are humorous expressions that will contrast with the trauma she is about to suffer.

Lineation: Notice the enjambments on lines 23-26: “connected /to” repeated twice. The idea of connection is highlighted by the continuity between one line and the next.

Sound patterns: Remember: it is the sound and not the spelling that you need to pay attention to. It is difficult for us to identify sound patterns in the original Irish version. In the English version, we see an interesting example of alliteration (repetition of initial consonant sound in nearby words –also in stressed syllables–): l. 2: **find -fishtail**; and consonance (repetition of final consonant sound in nearby words): l. 3: **clean – gone**. Such a traumatic act as excision is therefore highlighted by drawing attention to sounds that express it.

3. “Lack of Sympathy”

Theme: Islanders’ hostility against the merfolk (comparable to present-day hostility by English-language speakers against Irish-language speakers). Read about the Blasket Islands, which used to be inhabited by Irish-speaking people.

Structure: Part 1: All the poem except for the last two lines (the merfolk’s misadventures on the island), Part 2: Last two lines (the speaker/narrator’s summary of and opinion about the merfolk’s suffering).

Imagery: the motif of the gills (breathing organs of fish) achieves symbolical significance because the merfolk have lost their gills and, with them, the possibility to return and live in the sea.

Lineation: One interesting example of lineation is on lines 4-5: ...their youngsters / would fall.... Here you visualize the youngsters falling from one line to the next, due to the line break and the enjambment between the two lines.

Sound patterns: Alliteration: **razor-rocks**, to highlight the dangerous sharpness of the cliffs. **Blasted – bleak** (alliteration of consonant cluster) to reinforce the idea of an inhospitable place

4. "The Mermaid and Certain Words"

Theme: Self-denial: the mermaid has repressed her underwater identity for so long that she has broken all ties with her original identity.

Structure: Part 1. stanzas 1, 2, 3: The narrator describes the mermaid's self-hatred and her repression of her underwater identity ("She hates nothing so much / as being reminded of the underwater life that she led /..."). Part 2: 4, 5, 6: the speaker/narrator discovers that the mermaid was actually involved in ethnographic research about the merfolk, but she continues to deny it. Deception (hiding the truth) and self-denial.

Imagery: The manuscript "written in water, with the fin of a ray for a pen, / on a long scroll of kelp". Such a thing could not exist, of course, but it emphasizes the merfolk's intimate connection with the sea.

Lineation: 4th stanza, lines 1-2: "... I myself have found her out / in the deception." The theme of deception (hiding the truth) is highlighted by making the phrase stand on its own on a line.

Sound patterns: Notice the assonance (repetition of stressed vowel sounds in nearby words) on l. 3: wave, tide, ... raging, main, briny (/ei/, /ai/). This assonance makes the underwater world sound especially musical.

5. "A Remarkable Admission"

Theme: Clash between the modern scientific world (represented by the speaker) and the legendary one (Thomas)

Structure: Part 1. stanza 1: the speaker/narrator refers to one mermaid once using the expression 'ethnic cleansing' to explain the merfolk's ordeal. Part 2. stanzas 2, 3, 4: the speaker/narrator tells of the occasion when he met Thomas. Part 3. stanzas 5, 6, 7: Thomas explains that the dry land creatures have an equivalent under the sea. The poem suggests that Thomas is one of the merfolk and, when he disappears, the speaker is left in doubt as to his own identity.

Imagery: "Like a drowned man": simile that suggests the hybrid human-merman identity.

Lineation: Stanza 5, ll. 2-3: "... its equivalent / in the sea". The pause of the line break emphasizes the enigma about what kind of equivalent is being referred to.

Sound patterns: Stanza 2: alliteration of sound /k/ to refer to scientific subjects; **chemical**, **equations**, **accountancy**, **computing**. Notice that alliteration may take place at the beginning of a word or on its stressed syllable.

6. "Our Mermaid Goes Under Again"

Theme: The mermaid's decay as her life is coming to an end after a life of profound distress. The alienation (madness) she suffers as she is kept in a hospice.

Structure: Part 1. stanzas 1, 2, 3, 4: Past unhappy life of the mermaid (she only laughed three times in her life and she did so because she had supernatural powers to see what humans could not see). Part 2. stanzas 5, 6, 7: Present state of alienation in which the mermaid lives as she is getting close to her death ("the edge of the abyss")

Imagery: Simile “like a trout you’d caught with a rod”. This is another example of a sea animal that is being forced out of the water and eventually dies.

Lineation: Notice the parallelism on ll. 1-2 of stanza 6: “She’s neither here nor there / She’s neither fish nor flesh” to emphasize the mermaid’s lack of belonging

Sound patterns: Notice the pararhyme (repetition of initial and final consonant sounds in nearby words): **fish -flesh**. Two opposite words in their meaning (fish-flesh) are brought together and highlighted by the similarity in the sound. Lines 1 and 2 in this stanza are especially musical to stress the mermaid’s in-between state.

POSTCOLONIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THESE POEMS

Find examples (not all writers develop all the following concepts with the same amount of attention; some writers privilege some concepts over others) of colonial discourse (imposition and justification of the colonizer’s worldview), hegemony (domination with the consent of the colonized), mimicry (imitating the colonizer’s ways), Othering (alienation and marginalization of the subaltern/colonized), hybridity (mixed identity resulting from the long contact between the colonizer and colonized in contact-zones), nativism (idealization of the pre-colonial culture by presenting it as conflict-free), double colonization (women as being oppressed not just by the colonizer but also by the patriarchal ideology of their own group), colonial desire (the sexualization of the colonized –male or female), colonial patronage (cultural manifestations that are promoted by the colonizer and those that are dismissed as uncivilized).