

# John Pook

## 'In Chapel'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University  
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# BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

**(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)**

John Pook was born in 1942. He grew up in the small community of Gowerton near Swansea. As a child, he attended Gowerton Boys Grammar School.

As a young adult, he attended Queen’s College, Cambridge, to study English. Later, he studied Linguistics at the University of North Wales in Bangor. Having trained as an English teacher, Pook has also worked as an editor and translator. He spent time working for an airline reservation company which eventually led him to leave Wales and move to the south of France.

(A brief biography is available in the Library of Wales anthology *Poetry 1900–2000*, ed. Meic Stephens.)

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Title.

The title of the poem is direct and establishes the scene for the poem, which takes place in a chapel. Although very little further detail is offered by the title, it is worth noting the use of the term '**chapel**', a word used for a place of worship which has no fixed pastor and no permanent congregation. In this way, the chapel differs from a church, which would usually have both a fixed pastor or priest, as well as a permanent congregation. Ironically, the lack of permanency associated with a chapel is at odds with the apparent centrality of the chapel in the life of the poet's mother.

## Form.

The poem has been divided into lines of similar length and rhythm, with the stanzas replicating this structure. While each of the stanzas is form of a quatrain, the poem resists the rhyming scheme of a ballad, but its organised structure may recall, and perhaps even satirise, the format adopted by many hymns and prayers. There is relatively little punctuation in the first four stanzas of the poem, with each stanza notably ending mid-sentence and that sentence continuing in the first line of the following stanza. This structure perhaps suggests a continuity of both the chapel and the faith it has upheld across the years. In contrast, the final stanza starts with a new sentence and is therefore set apart from the others by this enforced pause between sentences.

## Lines 1-8.

The poem opens with a description of a child entering a chapel, specifically the vestry schoolroom. The level of detail included in the opening lines suggest that the speaker has been a frequent visitor. These first lines of the poem which are in the present tense make it difficult to discern if this scene is unfolding in the present of the poem or in a memory recalled from the past. The recollection of the '**vestry schoolroom**' implies that this is a place in which the speaker has attended Sunday School at some stage of his life, seemingly confirmed by the confession that this was a place where '**we kept / The faith and flirted with the girls**'.

As the poem moves into the second stanza, we infer that the speaker is returning to this chapel as an adult, noting that '**though everything has changed**' things within the building remain '**exactly as it was**'. This reflection implies that the chapel has remained unchanged while the speaker himself has grown and developed from the person he was when he attended as a child. Nevertheless, the description of the smell '**of flowers, polished wood**' suggests that there is something slightly stagnant about the chapel. While it may be clean and stocked with fresh flowers, the chapel remains unaffected and shielded from the wider world, even '**the smells**' remain the same and invoke memories for the speaker. The lines in these two stanzas flow easily together, with very little punctuation between them, reflecting the ease with which the speaker finds himself drawn back into his memories of his time spent within the chapel as a child.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Lines 9-16.

In these lines the speaker offers us a little more detail about the chapel. He describes the mop which rests **'behind the piano in the corner'**, which further reveals his familiarity with the building and its mundane rather than spiritual attributes, perhaps representing the (gendered?) labour that goes on behind the scenes. The description of **'the heavy Bible resting on the lectern'** is an interesting image, for the reason it depicts faith as a weight which is being held up by the stand from which the minister will deliver a sermon each week. In this image the Bible itself takes on additional significance, becoming a physical symbol for upholding the faith and conveying the Christian message within it. The weight of the Bible also suggests that the speaker regards the message contained within as a heavy burden which has the potential to be oppressive.

It is in the third and fourth stanzas that the speaker finally reveals the primary reason he is in the chapel. He explains that he is with his mother as she **'comes with dahlias, daffodils,'** to place in the chapel to fulfil **'her turn // On "Flower Rota"'**. The combination of flowers referenced by the speaker here is interesting as **'dahlias'** and **'daffodils'** do not usually bloom at the same time, suggesting that there is something artificial about the arrangement. Moreover, the **'Flower Rota'** itself is significant as it is capitalised and placed in inverted commas, which suggests a sense of mock gravitas and, perhaps, sarcasm from the speaker. He refers to the rota as something which is clearly carefully adhered to by his mother and **'its faces flip my mind'** alludes to the document which records the rota. The speaker considers this rota while his mother **'spends some time arranging flowers'** and, as he does so, recalls the names of the people whose **'faces flip'** in his mind. The reference to it being **'two decades'** indicates that it has been some considerable time since the speaker was last in the chapel and yet he is still able to find much with which he is familiar, further cementing the idea that the chapel (and what it represents) has changed very little in the time since his last visit. Tellingly, the speaker's own distance from the chapel is in sharp contrast with his mother's connection to the chapel as she spends her Saturday evening preparing the flowers ready for the service on Sunday.

The distance which exists between the speaker and his mother may also be reflective of a generational tension which undercuts the poem. While the image of his mother arranging flowers appears to be quite a peaceful one, the speaker's own time within the chapel is filled with tension. The recollection of faces which **'flip'** as he considers the **'Flower Rota'** suggests that the speaker is challenged or confronted by the memory of the names. Likewise, the twenty years which have passed since he was in the chapel are in stark contrast with his mother's frequent visits to the building and her involvement in its work. The mother/son relationship is subsequently one which epitomises the tension which exists between not only two different generations but between differing ways of life.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Lines 17-20.

The final stanza of the poem stands apart from the others. For instance, the stanza is separated by the start of a new sentence and divided by more punctuation than in the previous stanzas. Here the speaker uses the depiction of his mother filling the jar for the flowers with water to reflect on the passing of time. His comment of how this happens '**predictably**' attributes a sense of inevitability to the passing of time, reflected in the way the jar slowly '**fills up**' with water.

The atmosphere of inevitability is furthered by the observation that '**tomorrow will see**' his mother worship in the chapel '**as usual**', confirming that the chapel and services remain a pivotal part of his mother's daily life. At this point, the speaker diverges from his mother, drawing the focus of the poem back to himself as he describes himself as '**beer-dry**' while thinking of '**the cup**' his mother will drink from tomorrow. The term '**beer-dry**' may also be a reference to the Temperance movement within non-conformity, which was founded on the idea of promoting abstinence among members. The image of drinking may also be used here as a reference to the cup drunk from by the congregation during the communion service. In addition, the image is indicative of the rituals which take place within the chapel each week, many of which have non-spiritual manifestations. The cleaning rituals, the familiarity of flirting during Sunday School and preparing flowers on the Saturday evening are all examples of non-religious routines which the speaker clearly associates with the chapel. Despite the familiarity of the building and these rituals, the speaker's closing statement of '**I shall be elsewhere**' has a combative feel, as if he is making clear his distance from the chapel and his movement away from the faith of his childhood. It remains unclear whether the speaker intends to go straight from the chapel to the pub, or whether he is simply expressing resentment about spending his Saturday night in a chapel with his mother. Either way, it is worth noting that the Sunday Licensing law, which required pubs in Wales to close on a Sunday and were repealed in 1961, was the first legal act which recognised Wales as a distinct nation.

# COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'In Chapel' takes an ordinary, domestic task in the form of arranging flowers ahead of a religious service and uses it to explore the speaker's feelings. As he returns to a chapel he attended as a child, the speaker becomes aware of how strongly the chapel is still engrained within the life of his mother. There is nothing remarkable about this trip to the chapel where the speaker must wait while his mother arranges flowers for the next day's service. Yet, it is within the simplicity of watching his mother's routine that the speaker finds an opportunity to reflect on what the building used to mean to him. It is noticeable that the focus here was as much on the social interaction and 'flirt[ing]' which took place in the building as it was on the faith. Moreover, as the speaker returns to the chapel and looks around it, the emphasis is on the past and his previous experience in the chapel. This evidences that he does not feel a lasting connection with the building or the Christian faith.

Routine and ritual play a significant part in this poem, perhaps reflected by the structure of the poem (which is arranged into five stanzas, each of four lines in length). There are a number of lines in the poem which almost rhyme on alternating lines, but differ slightly from each other, while other alternating lines offer up a more conventional rhyme. This is evident in the third and fifth stanzas, which contain the rhymes 'lectern' and 'turn', and 'up' and 'cup'. The way in which these rhymes reoccur furthers the sense of inevitability about the mother's routine in arranging the flowers. The overall effect is a poem which offers a gentle rhythm which ebbs and flows in a style which seems to reflect the predictability of routine and the passage of time. This approach is in keeping with much of Pook's other poetry, which often adopts a reflective tone, drawing on familiar places or items to explore the past and our connection to it.

The gentle tone of the poem belies the undertone of rebellion which breaks through in the speaker's attitude as the poem draws to a close. Having started out 'follow[ing]' his mother into the chapel in the first stanza, by the end of the poem the speaker is keen to assert his own identity separating his own life from that of his mother. This sense of detachment which the speaker feels from his mother may also have a wider meaning. The figure of a mother is often used to represent the domestic sphere and a sense of nationhood within Wales; the speaker may, therefore, be displaying his own detachment from his childhood identity, the home and its way of life, which his mother represents.<sup>1</sup> What is evident throughout the poem is that while the chapel is a place which is still integral to his mother's identity, it is only now connected to the speaker as a piece of his past. As such, the poem speaks to the nature of identity and the way in which the parent/child relationship has diverged as the speaker has grown and built his own life. This life has extended beyond the influence of his mother and the insular security of the chapel. While the chapel and his mother continue as they have always done, it is clear that they are primarily representative of the speaker's past, and for this reason are no longer as central to his current life.

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(1) Deidre Beddoe discusses the concept of the archetypal 'Welsh Mam' and the presentation of the Welsh mother as 'hardworking, pious and clean, a mother to her sons and responsible for the home'. This representation in Welsh literature is common. See Deidre Beddoe, 'Images of Welsh Women' in *Wales: The Imagined Nation* ed. Tony Curtis (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1986) pp. 227-238.



# FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

- Look again at the alliteration used in the poem; what effect does this have?
- How does the speaker use his description of the chapel to convey a sense of familiarity with the building and its contents?
- How is the speaker's mother portrayed in the poem?
- Consider the use of pronouns in the poem. In what ways are they significant?



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