



# National Poetry Day in Scotland

Thursday 3 October 2013

## 'Water' Poem

from 'Seeker, Reaper' by George Campbell Hay



Teaching  
Resources:  
Secondary  
Schools

### The Poet and His Work

**George Campbell Hay (1915-1984)**

George Campbell Hay – or Deòrsa Mac Iain Dheòrsa, to use the Gaelic version of his name – was born in Renfrewshire in 1915, the son of John MacDougall Hay, author of the novel *Gillespie* (1914). After his father's death in 1919, he was brought up in Tarbert, Loch Fyne, before being sent on a scholarship to Fettes school, Edinburgh, and then to Oxford University. Holidays were spent back in Tarbert, where he developed his love of the area and its language and culture, and also began to learn both the trade of herring fishing, and the Gaelic spoken by the fishermen.

An ardent Scottish nationalist, Hay was opposed to involvement in the war, and spent October 1940 to May 1941 fleeing conscription in Argyll, but was finally caught, imprisoned, and then accepted war service in the Royal Army Ordinance Corps. While in Greece, he experienced a traumatic incident which led to the onset of mental illness from which he suffered for the rest of his life, most of which was spent in Edinburgh, until his death in 1984. A gifted linguist, his work was written in Gaelic, Scots and English, as well as French, Italian and Norwegian.

### The Poem

'Seeker Reaper' is in total 215 lines, written in a mixture of English, Scots, Gaelic and Norse. The extract on the print cards and poster is from the end of the poem.

It was first published in Hay's collection *Wind on Loch Fyne* (1948), and was reprinted in a special illustrated edition by the Saltire Society in 1988.

**Continued >**



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A slightly longer extract is available at [www.spl.org.uk/poetry/poems/seeker-reaper](http://www.spl.org.uk/poetry/poems/seeker-reaper)



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The quotes below are taken from *Collected Poems and Songs* of George Campbell Hay, vol. 2:

"This poem, like many of the more recent ones, was done straight onto the typewriter without notes, or a note of any sort, and commenced and completed in a matter of hours." (Catherine Hay [the poet's mother])

"There are young fishermen too, who like their vaunt about a boat that is 'a hawk and a tramper'. The old wild dynamism of the Highlands is still there, but, to our impoverishment, seldom expressed." (George Campbell Hay)

## Reading The Poem – Notes And Questions

Read the poem aloud. In the first stanza, there are four main stresses per line, for example

she's a **kyle**-coulter, **knot**-reeler, **thrang**-speed-**spinner**,  
her **mood** is moulded **on** her and the **mind** that made her's **in** her.

Look at the lines in the first stanza which describe the boat in three or four different ways (that is, lines 2-3, 5-7, 9-10, 12).

In groups, consider the meaning of 1 or 2 of these lines. Look up unfamiliar words.

- What sort of imagery is used to describe the boat?
- What is the boat compared to?
- What qualities is she said to have?

Compare the rhyme and metre of the first and second stanzas – in what ways are the similar, and in what ways different? Consider how the poem's rhyme and metre affect the way your perception of the boat is shaped.

In the second stanza, the words 'they', 'them' and 'their' all occur – what do they refer to?

There are several instances of repetition in the poem – l. 4, ll. 25-6, l.27. Why do you think the poet chooses to repeat these words and phrases?

### Discussion >



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Discuss any experiences you have had of fishing.

- Where did you fish?
- What bait did you use?
- What (if anything) did you catch?
- What did you do with your catch?
- What was the best thing about the experience? And the worst?

Discuss any voyages you have made at sea, whether on a ferry, a pleasure-boat, a fishing boat or a small kayak or dinghy. Compare your experiences of travelling at sea to your experiences of travelling on land. Which do you prefer, and why?

Discuss any experiences you have of rough seas, whether out in a boat, or surfing or swimming in them, or simply seeing them from the shore.

Describe your experience in terms of what you saw, heard, did and felt.

## Research

Find out about the Scottish fishing industry today.

- Which are the main harbours where fish and shellfish are landed?
- Which fish and shellfish are generally caught?
- What are the main threats to the industry?
- If there is a harbour near your school, find out what is landed there.

Sea-fishing can be a dangerous activity. Using the Scottish Water education resource on Water Safety at [www.scottishwater.co.uk](http://www.scottishwater.co.uk) consider what the main dangers might be, and what steps might be taken to mitigate them. Consider also how dangerous sea-fishing is compared with other activities (see Activity 4).

## Creative Activity >

3.

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## 'Water' Creative Activity

Write a poem about a journey, by sea or by land.



### Teaching Resources: Secondary Schools

'Seeker, Reaper'  
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Focus on the way you are travelling, whether by boat, by train, by car, by bike, or on foot.

Before you start make some notes about

- your means of transport – if for example by train, think about the look and sound of the train
- your point of departure
- the places you pass through en route
- your fellow travellers
- your destination
- the rhythms of the journey – regular or irregular
- in each case, think about **sounds** and **smells** as well as sights

Write a poem about the journey in three verses.

- In the first, describe setting out
- In the second, describe what happens while you are underway.
- In the third, describe your arrival at the destination.

(You could add additional verses in the middle, if lots of different things happen while you are travelling.)

Think about metre (rhythm) and rhyme.

- You could give your poem a definite rhythm, so the reader is given a sense of movement – though you could vary the rhythm through the poem, to give a sense of the different stages of the journey.
- Think about whether you want to use rhyme as well – perhaps through the whole poem, or perhaps just for certain parts, for emphasis.

### Further Reading and Links >

4.

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## Further Reading and Links

### Books

Byrne, Michel (ed.): *Collected Poems and Songs of George Campbell Hay* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press for the Lorimer Trust, 2000)

Hay, George Campbell: *Seeker, Reaper* (Edinburgh: Saltire Society, 1988); illustrated by Archie MacAlister

Hay, George Campbell: *Wind on Loch Fyne* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1948)

Martin, Angus: *Kintyre; The Hidden Past* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1984)

### Websites

[www.spl.org.uk/poetry/poets/george-campbell-hay](http://www.spl.org.uk/poetry/poets/george-campbell-hay)  
Biography, Poems (including extract from 'Seeker, Reaper'), Further Reading, In the Library, Other Useful Info, Links

[www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/mar/01/featuresreviews.guardianreview13](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/mar/01/featuresreviews.guardianreview13)  
A review of *Collected poems and songs of George Campbell Hay*

<http://peggybawn.wordpress.com/2013/03/22/scottish-literature-class>  
A blog post about the boat Sireadh (Gaelic for 'seeker') said to have inspired 'Seeker, Reaper'



[www.facebook.com/scottishpoetrylibrary](http://www.facebook.com/scottishpoetrylibrary)



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NPD poem posters, teaching resources & films:

[www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk](http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk)

Explore Scottish Water's education materials:

[www.scottishwater.co.uk](http://www.scottishwater.co.uk)

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