



National Poetry Day in Scotland

Thursday 3 October 2013

'Water' Poem



Teaching
Resources:
Secondary
Schools

'The Whale-watcher' by Kathleen Jamie

The Poet and Her Work

Kathleen Jamie (1962–)

Kathleen Jamie was born in Renfrewshire in 1962, and studied philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. She received an Eric Gregory Award from the Society of Authors in 1981; this recognition was followed by the release of her first collection, *Black Spiders*, in 1982, when she was just twenty. She has since published a number of prize-winning collections, including *The Queen of Sheba* (1994) and, most recently, *The Overhaul* (2012), as well as two books of essays on the natural world, *Findings* (2005) and *Sightlines* (2012). After teaching at the University of St Andrews for many years, she became Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Stirling in 2011.

The Poem

'The Whale-watcher' is from *The Tree House* (2004).

See also the essays 'Cetacean Disco' in *Findings* (2005) about whale – and dolphin-watching from a boat; and 'The Gannetry' in *Sightlines* (2012); about seeing killer whales from a clifftop in Shetland.

Reading The Poem – Notes And Questions

Describe what the narrator does in the poem.

In the poem, several familiar words are used in unfamiliar ways. What do these words mean, as they are used in the poem?
'quartering' 'brittle' 'breach' 'glare' 'rent'

ll.5-8 suggest a fairly uncomfortable experience. Why do you think the speaker is willing to put up with such discomfort?

What do ll.10-11 mean?

Continued >



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ll.5-8 suggest a fairly uncomfortable experience. Why do you think the speaker is willing to put up with such discomfort?

What do ll.10-11 mean?

The title tells us this is a poem about someone who watches whales, but the word 'whale' isn't used in the poem. Why do you think the poet has omitted it?

What period of time, roughly, does the poem describe?

Look at the poem's punctuation.

- Why do you think the poet uses a variety of punctuation marks?
- Why do you think the poet chose to write the whole poem as a single sentence?

Compare and contrast the first two lines, and last two lines, of the poem.

- What mood or emotion is conveyed by lines 1-2?
- What are the whales compared to in lines 15-16?
- What mood or emotion is conveyed by lines 15-16?

The poem uses rhyme and half-rhyme, sometimes in unusual ways.

- Look for any half-rhymes in the poem.
- Look for full rhymes in the poem.
- Is there a discernable pattern to the way rhyme is used? If so, describe it.

Look at the metre, or rhythm, of the poem.

- Count the number of stressed syllables in each line.
- Is there a discernable pattern to the metre? If so, describe it.
- How is the metre of the last two lines different from that used in the rest of the poem?
- What effect does this have?

Discussion >

2.

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Discussion

Discuss any creatures you have seen swimming in the sea – whales, seals, dolphins, porpoises, sharks, and so on.

- Describe where and when you saw them.
- What were the creatures doing?
- How did seeing them make you feel?

What other creatures have you seen in the wild?

Think about sea-creatures, birds, mammals and reptiles. Think about what you see locally – in the school grounds, in your garden, in local parks, in woods or on walks near your school or home.

Do you go out looking for specific creatures?

If so, which ones, and why?

Are you prepared to put up with some discomfort to see them?

Why?

Research

Sea-creatures can be harmed by pollution at sea, especially oil-spills. To research such events, see the Scottish Water education resource on Pollution, Activity 7, and Resource Sheets 5 and 6 at www.scottishwater.co.uk

This resource also mentions some harmful effects of marine dumping, that is, dumping of litter at sea (see Resource sheet 1a). If you live near the coast, and it's feasible to do so, visit a local beach, and look out for any litter which has been washed ashore. If it is safe to do so, you could collect some of it – especially plastic containers – and make a display of it in school.

Plastics washed out to sea disintegrate into tiny particles, but these particles can gather together as 'garbage patches'. Find out

- where the largest of these patches are
- how the particles come to gather in one place
- how garbage patches affect marine life in the area.

Creative Activity >

3.

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Creative Activity

Many poems in Kathleen Jamie's book *The Tree House* are based on the observation of creatures in the wild. As well as 'The Whale-watcher', there are poems about frogs, swallows, bats and dolphins.

Write a poem based on observation of a wild creature.

You could model it on Kathleen Jamie's poem 'The Dipper'. This is the last poem in *The Tree House*, and is also available online at www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/31402

In the first verse, describe where you see the creature.
In the second verse, describe what the creature does.
In the third verse, describe how this encounter makes you feel, or what it makes you think about.

4.

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Further Reading and Links

Books by Jamie Kathleen

The Overhaul (London: Picador, 2012); *Sightlines* (London: Sort Of, 2012); *Findings* (London: Sort Of, 2005); *The Tree House* (London: Picador, 2004)

Websites

www.spl.org.uk/poetry/poets/kathleen-jamie

Biography, Poems (including 'The Whale-watcher'),
Further Reading, In the Library, Links

<http://literature.britishcouncil.org/kathleen-jamie>

Biography, Critical Perspective, Bibliography and Awards

www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=190

6 poems read by the author

www.transculturalwriting.com/radiophonics/contents/writersonwriting/kathleenjamie

[writersonwriting/kathleenjamie](http://www.transculturalwriting.com/radiophonics/contents/writersonwriting/kathleenjamie)

'The Graduates' (a poem); Analysis; 'Writers who have influenced me'

www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/jun/18/featuresreviews.guardianreview15

[guardianreview15](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/jun/18/featuresreviews.guardianreview15) Profile of Kathleen Jamie



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