The Pastoral in Skirrid Hill

Rebecca Wilshaw considers the poetry of Owen Sheers in the light of ideas about the Pastoral.

What is the Pastoral?

The pastoral can be defined as 'a work of literature portraying an idealised or romanticised version of country life'. The perceived ideal is to work with the land – as a shepherd would – and allow traditional living to alleviate the damage caused by modern life. Writers tend to use the pastoral to demonstrate how people attempt to return to nature in order to find answers to and perspective on their problems in the simplicity inherent in the natural world.

A concept central to pastoralism is that of the innocent perspective of childhood – a view which may be more nostalgic than realistic. It's an idea which links quite nicely with classical ideals of the Garden of Eden and Arcadia – idyllic visions of an unspoiled wilderness, in which human life is innocent and simple. Unfortunately, this 'idyll' is almost always corrupted as people mature, irreversibly leaving behind the purity of childhood and becoming tainted by the knowledge of sin. In this way, both the pastoral and its ideas of childhood can be used by writers to represent and explore ideas of innocence, simplicity, playfulness, and an imaginative openness.

Sheers' Use of the Pastoral

The note at the beginning of Skirrid Hill reads: 'Skirrid: from the Welsh 'Ysgyrid', a derivation of 'Ysgariad' meaning divorce or separation'. Within the collection, Sheers seems to use the pastoral mode of writing to illustrate the 'movement from childhood to adulthood' – as described in the blurb on the back of the book – and the consequent separation between the two. As is central to the pastoral ideal, Sheers suggests that the loss of and separation from childhood arises from our discovery of sin, which carries us into an adult, experienced view of the world. In the same way as rural and urban settings are interpreted symbolically, so childhood and adulthood are seen as states of mind – a metaphor familiar from Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience'.

The speaker in 'Hedge School', as a child, symbolising innocence, finds fulfilment in the simple task of 'the picking of blackberries' on his 'walk home from school.' Ultimately, however, he becomes like

> *a boy who's discovered for the very first time,*
> *just how dark he runs inside*

– as we all inevitably must. While this powerful simile may describe the speaker's discovery of the blood inside him, Sheers keeps its intended meaning deliberately vague: it could also be suggested that the speaker has stumbled upon his own mortality, or even an awareness of the sin inherent in humanity. It seems he has irreversibly shifted away from the childlike assumption of immortality, and

is forced to confront, as adulthood demands, the vulnerability and impermanence of human life. 'Hedge School' appears to mirror the story of the Garden of Eden – a symbol for pastoral innocence and its loss; the speaker begins in a childlike paradise of 'walks home from school' 'picking blackberries', but the poem is completed with a discovery of knowledge and sin – echoing Adam and Eve's discovery of the knowledge of good and evil upon eating the fruit from the tree in Eden. In his imitation of the pastoral concepts of Eden and Arcadia – and their inevitable corruption – Sheers illustrates how, at the discovery of sin, we are borne into experience – that is, into an adult perspective, and can no longer return to the innocent paradise that childhood and Eden offer.

Disconnection from Nature

In Skirrid Hill, Sheers also suggests that upon our progression to adulthood, we become separated from nature – which, in an idealised form, is central to ideas of the pastoral and, perhaps more importantly, has long been associated in literature with innocence, authenticity and freedom. As illustrated in 'Hedge School', our involuntary shift away from childhood simultaneously removes us from the pastoral ideals of Eden and Arcadia. These paradises of natural splendour become closed to us – similarly to Adam and Eve's banishment from Eden – and we become trapped in an urbanised, adult world.

What's interesting about the way Sheers describes childhood and a child's innocent, joyful relationship to his environment is that it's a question of perception as much as reality. In 'Border Country', for example, the setting is not a rural idyll, as we might conventionally expect in the pastoral, but a scrapyard. The poem describes an adult returning to the scrapyard where he used to play as a child to find

> *the cars smaller*
> *or the undergrowth grown,*
> *whichever, the whole diminished to steel and stone.*

The excitement of 'an elephant's graveyard' or 'a motorway pile-up' has been replaced by 'Just cars in a quarry'. It seems that after growing up, the speaker is now set in 'stone' and has lost the imagination that, in childhood, was infinite. A once beloved refuge has been 'diminished to steel and stone', and now seems insignificant. Our loss of imagination could stem from an awareness and acceptance of reality that comes with adulthood. After maturing, our childhood games seem silly, and while we may remember them with a degree of fondness, we are all eventually brought back to the pressures of the present. The imaginative freedom and uninhibited play, not the physical environment, here symbolise a pastoral idyll of childhood.

In a wonderful proclamation of freedom, the speaker describes his childhood self and his companion as 'young as the buzzards above us', which links them with the natural world. On his return, however, he

> *disturbed a buzzard*
> *that flew from its branch like a rag*
> *shaken out in the wind.*

While this seems to serve as a poignant reminder of his childhood, it implies a disharmony between the speaker and the nature he was once in balance with. The buzzard, 'spiralling upwards', could signify his final departure from childhood, and therefore his disconnection from nature.

Retreat into Nature

In an attempt to solve our problems, we often retreat into nature in the hope that it will provide some relief and clarity for our lives. Sheers uses the pastoral mode of writing to suggest that once we allow ourselves to retreat into nature, the pressures of the adult world fade away, and we are returned to a sense of childlike freedom.

In 'The Equation', we are told about a man who, after 'waving away/the blackboard's hieroglyphics', 'return[s] home to the sweet methane of the chicken sheds'. It seems he has retreated to the simplicity and comfort nature offers, and allowed it to 'wave away' the complications presented by his job in the working world. By letting go of the various pressures of our daily lives, we can return to the infinite imagination and innocence we found in nature as children. He becomes

> *like a magician whose tricks are just the way of things*

producing

> *one egg, warm and bald in his brown palm.*

Here, Sheers has turned the mundane task of collecting eggs into a magic trick, and created a sense of the childlike imagination and fulfilment that a retreat into nature brings.

Return to Reality

Many of the poems in the collection explore the emotional significance and healing effects of nature, and remind us of the natural beauty surrounding us, which we have come to take for granted. Sheers uses poetry to illustrate how nature can resolve complications, describing in 'Farther' 'the wood, simplified by snow' and 'the dry stone wall, its puzzle solved by moss'. In spite of this appreciation for nature, however, he also suggests that the effects of the pastoral are merely temporary, and cannot last after we return to the adult world. 'Snow' and 'moss', whilst described as simplifying and puzzle-solving, are impermanent and fragile, and although it seems as if they have provided a sense of comfort, it can only be fleeting. The man in 'The Equation', despite finding contentment in 'the sweet methane of the chicken sheds', must always return to his job of 'teaching logarithms'.

The couple in 'Winter Swans' retreat into nature in an attempt to mend their fracturing relationship, and seem to leave with a sense of hope and clarity, their hands mimicking the swans to 'swim the distance between them'. However, this part of the collection, focusing on romantic relationships and beginning with 'Marking Time', is rounded off with 'Keyways', which depicts the aftermath of an eventually broken relationship. If the couple in each poem is the same, then Sheers tells the story of the stages of a relationship across the collection. After an attempt to resurrect their dying relationship in 'Winter Swans', the couple are eventually forced back to reality in 'Keyways', where they have accepted that 'a turn that failed to dock' is something they cannot recover from. Through this, Sheers

suggests that whilst a retreat to nature is comforting and healing, its effects cannot last once we have returned to reality. The pastoral ideals become inapplicable in the modern world, and we soon fall back into the rhythm of our daily lives, until we once more seek the comfort that the simplicity of nature offers.

Throughout the collection, Sheers invites us to consider our own attitudes to nature, and seems to view the pastoral ideals with fondness, reminding us of the value of the natural splendour that surrounds us. While our connection to nature dwindles as we grow, the pastoral lifestyle continually calls us back to the comfort and safety it offers in its familiarity. We can, rather poignantly, relive the freedom of our childhood and, for a time at least, find refuge from our problems in nature's simplicity.

Article Written By: Rebecca Wilshaw is currently studying A Level English Literature at St Bartholomew's School in Newbury.

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