‘The one I’ll keep’ – The Permanent Impact of Impermanent Relationships in Skirrid Hill

In Thomas Church’s view, romantic and sexual relationships are at the heart of this collection by Owen Sheers, with a particular focus on the impact of separation and feelings of permanent change when these come to an end.

Sheers’ second collection of poetry, Skirrid Hill, begins with a note on the title’s meaning:

> *‘Skirrid: from the Welsh Ysgyrid, a derivation of Ysgariad meaning divorce or separation.’*

While many of the poems do deal with a variety of separations of one kind or another – breakdowns in relationships, family distance, or even death – I would argue that the central theme of the collection is not transience, but the permanent impact of impermanent moments, particularly in relation to sexual and romantic relationships. The motifs of divorce or separation are merely lenses through which a reader can examine how people are fundamentally changed by experiences shared with others. While poems in the collection such as, ‘Border Country’, ‘Farther’, ‘On Going’ and ‘Y Gaer’ examine how separation within family relationships can mark an individual, it is also illuminating to consider how relationships we choose for ourselves, even if they don’t last, leave an equally permanent mark on our lives.

‘Keyways’

One of the earlier poems in the collection, ‘Keyways’, discusses the impact of a shared life using the conceit of keys being cut. The poet reflects on how, at the beginning of a relationship, one might resemble an uncut key, ‘a smooth blade, edentate.’ It is through the

> *milling and grooves*
> *of moments in time*

spent with someone that permanent impressions are made on each partner. The physical manifestations of this cohesion are reflected in the characters’ sleeping arrangements where he sleeps with his ‘knees in the hollows’ of hers, forming ‘a master key fit’. The extended metaphor of keys and locks here could be romantic in that each key is made for one lock and they fit together perfectly. However, the penetrative action of inserting a key into a lock, coupled with the imagery of

sleeping together, could imply nothing more than sexual compatibility – a modern approach to relationships where each partner tests the suitability of the other. While this partnership seems to have all of the hallmarks of connection, it is suggested halfway through the poem that, even when they feel most connected,

> *in that chapel... touching at elbow, shoulder and hip*

the relationship is about to collapse. Rather than being symbiotic entities, they are likened to

> *Siamese twins sharing one lung.*

One could read this as a dangerous co-dependence where each partner is taking too much from the other. The divorce or separation promised by the collection's title is fast approaching; the poet reflects on how the 'click' between them never came. However, there is not a simple reversion to the smooth 'edentate' blade from the poem's opening. The couple cannot go back to tabula rasa; they must now change 'all the locks' because their lives have been milled and grooved by the other's presence in an indelible fashion. While it is clear here that Sheers believes that romantic relationships in the modern era are not necessarily permanent, the marks left on the participants certainly are.

The Effects of Age and Experience

Returning once more to the start of the collection, a reader might notice that, as well as the translation of the Welsh meaning of Ysgariad and an implied recognition of the complexities of modern relationships, the collection's epigram may go some way to explain why these divides occur. The poet T.S. Eliot posits the idea that

> *as we grow older*
> *the world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated*
> *Of dead and living.*

Sheers seems to engage wholeheartedly with the concept of age and experience complicating the simple naïvety of youth and innocence in Skirrid Hill. He examines the ambiguities of language, relationships, and one's internal and external worlds both within a relationship and when one, with the benefits of age and hindsight looks back on them with an older eye. To this end, Sheers regularly compounds the physical, mental and emotional landscapes of the people in his poems, suggesting, maybe, that nothing can be understood in isolation; it has to be contextualised in time and space for it to be fully grasped.

'Marking Time'

For example, the liminal regions between the physical and psychological are explored in the poem 'Marking Time'. In this ambiguous title, Sheers may be encouraging the reader to question everything that follows. Could 'Marking Time' be about marking a significant event? A reference to waiting for something to happen, standing still, going nowhere? Or, with the benefit of hindsight, could it be

both? The ambiguity could reflect his feelings about unsuccessful relationships and, more generally, the sense that as one grows older the politics of relationships becomes 'more complicated'.

The first lines of 'Marking Time' highlight the uneasy border between the physical and mental marks left by moments in relationships:

> *That mark upon your back is finally fading*
> *in the way our memory will.*

The connection between the physical act of making love, where they 'worked up that scar' and the memory of that night, or the relationship as a whole, is clear. The enjambment here could also highlight how, far from there being a secure border between the physical and mental landscapes of Sheers' characters, the membrane between their bodies and their memories is permeable. When describing the scar, Sheers chooses the metaphor of

> *two tattered flags flying from your spine's mast*

possibly symbolising the union of their two bodies. In this image, he is alluding to the practice of nailing one's colours to the mast in naval combat to signify loyalty and the intention to fight to the death for a cause. In this case, the flags are 'tattered', torn and damaged. This union clearly will not last and does not come without pain, at least for the female partner, suggesting that maybe Sheers is considering the problematic gender politics of sexual relationships.

On the other hand, the poem does suggest that even if all the partners are doing is marking time, elements of the relationship will persist. In the second stanza, the voice of the poem reflects that the scars, though they are 'fading', are like the signs left by 'lovers who carve trees' and though they buckle 'under time' they never disappear entirely. Rather, though changed,

> *under the bark, the skin,*
> *the loving scar remains.*

Sheer's oxymoronic use of 'loving scar' could highlight the bittersweet memory of a past relationship. The fact that it has left a 'scar' implies that the marks left on the body and the psyche are permanent even if the relationship itself is not. The use of 'loving' is another ambiguous epithet. 'Loving' could reference the fact that the scar is a result of making love, a reminder of the night when their 'lust wouldn't wait for bed'. However, it is a loving, not lustful scar; this could suggest that the scar from this relationship is more on the heart than on the skin. Though the night, the act of love-making and the relationship was fleeting and ephemeral, the marks it has left on the participants endure.

'Valentine'

Finally, the poem from which the titular line of this article is taken, 'Valentine' explores the conscious acquisition of permanent memories from transitory moments. In this poem, Sheers returns to his

favoured verse form, the tercet. This inherently unbalanced poetic form may be explicitly chosen to emphasise the unbalanced nature of the relationship. Sheers' first stanza explores a painful moment incongruously set in Paris, the city of love. The sound of the lover's heels walking away is described in terms of 'water torture' emblematic, perhaps, of the pain of a loved one weeping. Despite the knowledge that this relationship may be over, the single line stanza with its emphatic modal verb choice,

> *That will be one memory*

implies a sense of certainty that this moment will remain locked in the speaker's mind. Sheers continues to explore the complexities around relationships and the memories associated with them in the contradictory lines that bring the second stanza to a close:

> *your wet lashes, the loss of everything we'd learnt.*
> *That will be another.*

Here, the poet may be mourning the loss of certainties that had grown up within the relationship and is confronting the new knowledge that 'the pattern [becomes] more complicated' as relationships mature and that they can be tenuous things at best.

The final tercet of 'Valentine' explores the imagery of shipwreck survivors who are 'uncertain' whether to laugh or weep. A metaphorical wreck could imply that the relationship has sunk beneath the waves and is over. However, the fact that they are survivors 'who had thought themselves done for' could imply that they have survived the tempestuous argument that sprang up around them, the past tense implying a danger that is no longer a threat. However, the line 'washed up' is characteristically ambiguous; have they been washed up on safe shores? Or are they washed up and worn out: unable to continue? There is an irony, then, in Sheers' final assertion in this poem:

> *That my valentine, will be the one I'll keep.*

It is an 'uncertain' memory at best and a reminder of a moment that cannot last, but that may be why it is so precious to the poem's speaker; it is a reminder of the fragility of moments spent with others and, as established by the epigram, nothing is certain in adult life. Far from becoming clearer as we grow, the world only becomes more complicated. Perhaps Sheers suggests that all one can ask of a romantic relationship is that it is memorable

Article Written By: Thomas Church is Deputy Head of English at Sidcot School in Somerset.

This article was first published in emagazine 96, April 2022.

Print