



# ceumannan 5

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Notaichean an tidseir -  
An Còmhradh – Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn  
*Teacher's notes - An Còmhradh*

## Litricheas - An Còmhradh

### Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn (1928-1998)

A prolific poet and novelist, Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn wrote in both English and his native Gaelic. He was born in Glasgow and brought up from the age of two in Bayble, Lewis by his widowed mother.

Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn was an ardent atheist, despite being brought up in a close knit, strongly Presbyterian, community. His dislike for the dogma and authority of the church is clearly evident in much of his work.

### "An Còmhradh"

"An Còmhradh" belongs to a particular genre of short story that explores the effect one particular moment or event can have on the lives and minds of the characters involved. In this type of story, the plot (or, more correctly, the lack of one) is of little importance. A skilled writer will bring the reader right to the heart of events very quickly, without much preamble, creating an effective and clear impression of the situation so that they feel immersed from the outset. Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn is particularly well known for his stories of this genre; stories which can at first appear very simple but with closer consideration reveal layer upon layer of meaning.

"An Còmhradh" is a good example of this type of story – from the very first line our attention is caught by the somewhat cryptic hook, **"Tha mi toilichte gun tàinig thu. Chan e mo chuire-sa nach robh thu so roimhe, ach leis an fhìrinn innse 's e Tormod fhèin bu chuireach..."** Immediately we are wondering who *thu* is. What has happened? Who is Tormod? And how is he to blame?

In the next couple of lines it becomes clear that the voice speaking in the story is a grieving mother talking to a young friend of her son, Tormod, reflecting on the final weeks of his life before it was cut short by terminal illness. **"Bha e cho geal aig an deireadh. Sia bliadhna deug cuideachd. (Sin an aois a bha e. An e bliadhna a th' aig ort fhèin?)"** The character of the minister is mentioned, **"Ach bha am ministear a-staigh gun sgar"** and we realise that he will most likely play a pivotal role in events.

**"'S am ministear a' feuchainn ri innse dha cho dona 's a bha e. ... Dia! Dh'fheumadh e smaoineachadh air Dia is teine ifrinn."**

From the first few paragraphs we get a good picture of the kind of boy young Tormod was in life: happy, mischievous and very close to his mother, until that is, the particular 'moment' occurs that would suddenly change both the lives and states of mind of both of them. The moment in question comes when, possibly exasperated by Tormod's apparent lack of interest in God, the minister plays his trump card – revealing to the boy that he [Tormod] is going to die. From that point onwards, the relationship between mother and son changes. Tormod's state of mind undergoes an obvious change and his mother is left reflecting on the fallout of events.

"An Còmhradh" is a somewhat bleak, yet thought provoking, poignant story that works on many levels.



## Obair 4 Ceistean

(NB Answers are neither set nor exhaustive)

1. The *còmhradh* or conversation refers to Tormod's mother talking to his friend. It is ironic in that there is no actual conversation in the story. It is only Tormod's mother's voice that we hear recounting events. Could this maybe be seen as an internal conversation that Tormod's mother is having with her own conscience/inner voice?
2. From the very opening of the story the reader is drawn in by the cryptic nature of the opening lines. There are many unanswered questions. Who is this person the mother is thankful to see? Who is Tormod? How, and for what, is Tormod to blame?

The use of ellipses enhances the effect. They indicate here a deliberate omission or that the speaker has trailed off and left the sentence and/or her thoughts unfinished. The ellipses leaves the reader hanging and immediately interested to find out more.

Mac a' Ghobhainn goes directly into the story and there is no superfluous introduction or information about characters or events, taking the reader straight into the action. As is characteristic of Mac a' Ghobhainn's style, there are no wasted words.

3. Ellipses are used on a number of occasions in the story and for different effects. Generally ellipses suggest an omission of something, information, thought, or speech. They can also be used to indicate trailing off (aposiopesis) and to build tension and dramatic effect. For example in the opening lines of the story the reader is left wanting to find out more,

**"ach leis an fhìrinn innse 's e Tormod fhèin bu choireach . . ."**

Furthermore, an ellipsis can suggest faltering or fragmented speech accompanied by confusion, insecurity, distress or uncertainty. This is true of the following example where the ellipses demonstrate Tormod's distress when he is told he is dying. He is struggling to talk through tears.

**"Seadh, a ghràidh?"**

**"Gu bheil mi ..." Cha mhòr gu faigheadh e air bruidhinn.**

**"Gu bheil mi ...**

**... dol a ...**

**bhàsachadh!"**

Ellipses can also have the effect of inferring something that is unsaid – leading the reader to make the assumption the writer wants them to make without having to spell it out. For example,

**"Dè b' urrainn dhomh a ràdh? Nach e 'n fhìrinn a bh' aig a' mhinistear? Ach air mo shon-sa..."**

We can infer from this that although Tormod's mother knows the minister was telling the truth when he told Tormod he was going to die, she herself didn't agree with what he said and that maybe she would have handled things differently.

4. Tormod mother refers to him having told her all about the mischief that he and his friends would get up to.



**“Nach eil cuimhn’ agam an latha a ghoid sibh an silidh air a’ chaillich, ‘s a ruith sibh? ‘S an oidhch’ a chroch sibh an radan bhon ròpa am meadhan an taighe? Tha cuimhn’ agam air.”**

and

**“dh’innseadh e gach nì a rinn e”**

The fact that he was open with her about such things infers they once had a close relationship. He obviously wasn’t frightened to confide in her and knew that she would not judge him harshly.

5. Tormod is portrayed as having once been a fun loving, happy, mischievous boy. We know this by the tricks he is said to have played on people.

**“Cha robh càil air aire Thormoid an toiseach ach gàireachdainn.”**

**“Ach esan, cha robh ann ach fealla-dhà dhàsan”**

His mother reflects on how he changed, giving an insight into his character before he changed.

**“Is sguir e a dh’innse nan sgeulachdan ud. Cha robh e a’ gàireachdainn a-nis idir. Bha e na bu shàmhach na chleachd e.”**

6. The church appears to play a pivotal role in the community. Firstly this can be evident from the minister’s frequent visits. More illuminating, however, is the inference that Tormod’s mother felt unable to go against anything the minister said or did with regards to her son and his condition. Her ambivalence about how the minister dealt with the situation is clear. She outwardly praises him on two occasions, **“ministear math”**, though we get the impression that she wanted to deal with the situation differently. For this reason it may be fair to say the writer sees the church/minister as having an oppressive, controlling and dictatorial influence.

- 7.a. Possibly the minister might have felt Tormod was frivolous and did not take religion/him seriously? Would knowing he was going to die make him less so? Would it persuade him to turn to God and repent for his past misdemeanors? From the perspective of the minister, he would have felt it his duty not to hide the truth from Tormod. It would have been morally wrong to tell a lie (even by omission).

- b. Tormod is extremely, and understandably, distressed when the minister tells him he is going to die. His mother hears his scream and rushes to comfort him as best she can, cradling him and stroking his hair. The ellipses demonstrate Tormod’s distress – he is struggling to talk through tears.

**“Seadh, a ghràidh?”**

**“Gu bheil mi ...” Cha mhòr gum faigheadh e air bruidhinn.**

**“Gu bheil mi ...**

**... dol a ...**

**bhàsachadh!”**

- c. It must have been very upsetting for Tormod’s mother to see him so distraught. It could be inferred that she disagreed with the minister’s decision to tell her son that he was dying. She had obviously kept this information from him. She must have felt powerless to say anything contrary to the facts to comfort her son.



**“Cha tuirt mi smid. Dè b’ urrainn dhomh a ràdh, ‘s mo làmh a’ ruith tro fhalt. Dè b’ urrainn dhomh a ràdh? Nach e ‘n fhirinn a bh’ aig a’ mhinistear? Ach air mo shon-sa ...”**

- d. Pupil’s own personal response.
- e. Tormod starts wanting to spend more time with the minister instead of his mother.

He has become quieter.

He doesn’t laugh anymore.

He appears withdrawn, spiritless.

Appears to have taken an interest in the Bible (although it may be worth noting that the Bible was the only book that was given to him so this may not necessarily have been through choice.)

He doesn’t communicate with his mother in the same way he used to.

In short, his character and his relationship with his mother have changed.

**“Agus, a thaobh a’ mhinisteir, bhiodh Tormod ga iarraidh-san cuideachd na bu trice na bha e gam iarraidh fhìn mar gum biodh fhios aig a’ mhinistear air rùn-diomhair ... Is sguir e a dh’innse nan sgeulachdan ud. Cha robh e a’ gàireachdainn a-nis idir. Bha e na bu shàmhach na chleachd e.”**

- 8. The following are suggested answers to these questions. Anything that pupils can back up with evidence from the text will be permissible.
  - i. The minister is sitting in a chair with his stick in his hand – suggesting him to be austere and dictatorial, as if he is sitting in judgement. When we consider the context of this image, it is telling and maybe unsettling. Tormod is obviously very distressed. The news of his impending death comes to him literally like a strike from the minister’s stick. We know he has screamed and then breaks down in tears when he tells his mother what the minister has told him. The fact that the minister has remained seated and at a distance, with his stick in his hand is worthy of comment. Why is he, who is charged with spiritual care of this young boy, acting in such a stoical manner? Why is he not comforting the boy and his mother with words or actions in what was obviously a very distressing situation? It is likely that the writer is trying to portray the minister in a cold and unfeeling way to reflect his own negative feelings toward the church. We know Mac a’ Ghobhainn was intolerant of the island’s strict Presbyterian culture and so his portrayal of the minister is not surprising.
  - ii. When Tormod was close to the end of his life, his mother remarks that she would see him touching the sunlight as it fell on his bedroom wall beside his bed. This is such a poignant image. Might it suggest that he is making a last feeble effort to cling to the warmth of life? Could it suggest he is attempting to re-connect with his life before the defining ‘moment’ took place where there was once joy, warmth and light? This image of warmth and light is in stark contrast with the coldness and darkness of death.
  - iii. The dichotomy between warmth and cold, light and dark is evident in this image. The Bible is cold as ice as it falls from Tormod’s dead hand, yet the day was warm and the room sunlit. Mac a’ Ghobhainn’s dislike of religion and the doctrine of the church are apparent as he links the bible with coldness **“mar gu suathadh duine ann an iarann a tha trom le deigh”** – a very strong and effective simile. When Tormod’s mother





picks up the Bible she comments on its coldness. Could this be symbolic of her losing her faith? Losing any comfort/warmth she may have previously found in the Bible now that her son is dead?

9. a & b Pupil's own personal responses.

10. Pupils' views may differ here but generally you might expect them to surmise that Tormod's mother feels saddened, and possibly guilty, as she recounts events – saddened by the deterioration in her son's health and character and ultimately his death, and guilty at not having dealt with the situation differently.

11. Themes: religion, relationships, death, guilt, change...

12. Literary techniques:

**Contrast** – light/dark, cold/warmth, contrast of character of Tormod before and after the 'moment', contrast between the characters of the Mother and the minister. Teachers may want to elaborate more on the technique of using contrast, something which is common in Mac a' Ghobhainn's work.

**Ellipses:** See answers 2 and 3

**Imagery:** (see answer 8)

13. The author's negative view of religion is apparent in "An Còmhraidh". The role of the minister and the implied grip of the church on the community are not portrayed in a positive light. The minister appears joyless, austere and unfeeling and the church dictatorial and controlling. Tormod's mother outwardly refers to the minister as being good though this might not be a true reflection of her feelings, she is possibly unable to vocalise anything to the contrary because of the position of high regard in which the church was held by the community.

14. Pupil's own response.

