

# THE EVE OF ST AGNES

*Harry Clarke*

## Harry Clarke

Harry Clarke, an Irish illustrator and stained-glass artist, was born on March 17<sup>th</sup>, 1889. In his youth, he was exposed to many art schools through working with his father, who was a church decorator. He partook in evening classes in the Metropolitan College of Art and Design and by 1910, he was awarded a gold medal for a stained-glass piece in the 1910 Board of Education National Competition.



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## Book Illustration

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Clarke left Ireland to seek work as a book illustrator in London, and was commissioned many times, although some were not completed since much of his work was destroyed during the 1916 Easter Rising.

Although there were many difficulties with his previous illustration projects, *Fairy Tales* by Hans Christian Andersen became his first printed work, including 16 colour plates and over 24 halftone illustrations. He gained a positive reputation as a book illustrator through many other projects he worked on.

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## Stained Glass

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Over 130 windows were produced by Harry Clarke throughout his life, himself and his brother also taking over their father's studio after his death in 1921.

His art is easily recognizable by his distinct style, a style that is seen from his work as an illustrator, to any of his watercolour, gouache and pencil works and most famously, in his stained-glass pieces.

He uses rich colours, his love for the deep blues in the Cathedral of Chartres' stained-glass inspiring his work. He uses both heavy and thin lines for his work and has incredible detail to each piece of his.

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## Background

In 1923, Harold Jacob of *Jacob's Biscuits* commissioned a stained-glass window, proposing the idea of 'Night and Morning' or 'Summer and Winter', although Harry Clarke suggested another idea for this piece.

'The Eve of St Agnes' is a romantic poem written by John Keats in 1819, what later becomes a source for another Harry Clarke masterpiece.

The poem is set in the Middle Ages, based on a folk belief that a girl could see her future husband in a dream if she performed certain rituals on the eve of St. Agnes – 'She would go to bed without any supper and transfer pins one by one from a pincushion to a sleeve while reciting the Lord's Prayer.'

The poem tells a story of a girl completing this ritual, hoping to dream about the man she loves but cannot see. It's similar to Shakespeare's '*Romeo and Juliet*'. She wakes up to find he had snuck into her room and they both flee together so they won't be caught together.

Harry Clarke completed eighteen watercolour studies in preparation for the window, these watercolour and gouache paintings are on display at Crawford Art Gallery.

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# Numb Were the Beadsman's Fingers

*While he Told his Rosary*



This is the first scene in the piece, and ultimately, my favourite scene.

I think it shows off the artist's capabilities, mixing pencil-work, watercolours and gouache paint. His delicate work and fine line-art and extreme detail is what makes me love this piece.

The colour palette remains only blues, black and white, and I think it shows how cold and calm the scene is. I love how thin and precise each line and paint stroke are, even down to the beads around the hands and the detail on the sculpture on the wall.

The hands, bodies and each detail are drawn in an elongated, delicate style, which I really like.

Harry Clarke's unusual style is something I adored studying. I feel inspired by his use of colour and how expressive each scene is in the stories he tells through his pieces, whether it's illustrating a novel or making a stained-glass window. I hope to find myself as an illustrator in the future, making Harry Clarke an artist I thoroughly enjoyed researching. I love capturing emotion in my art and telling a story, and I aspire to be as skilled as he is.

Rachel Woodhouse

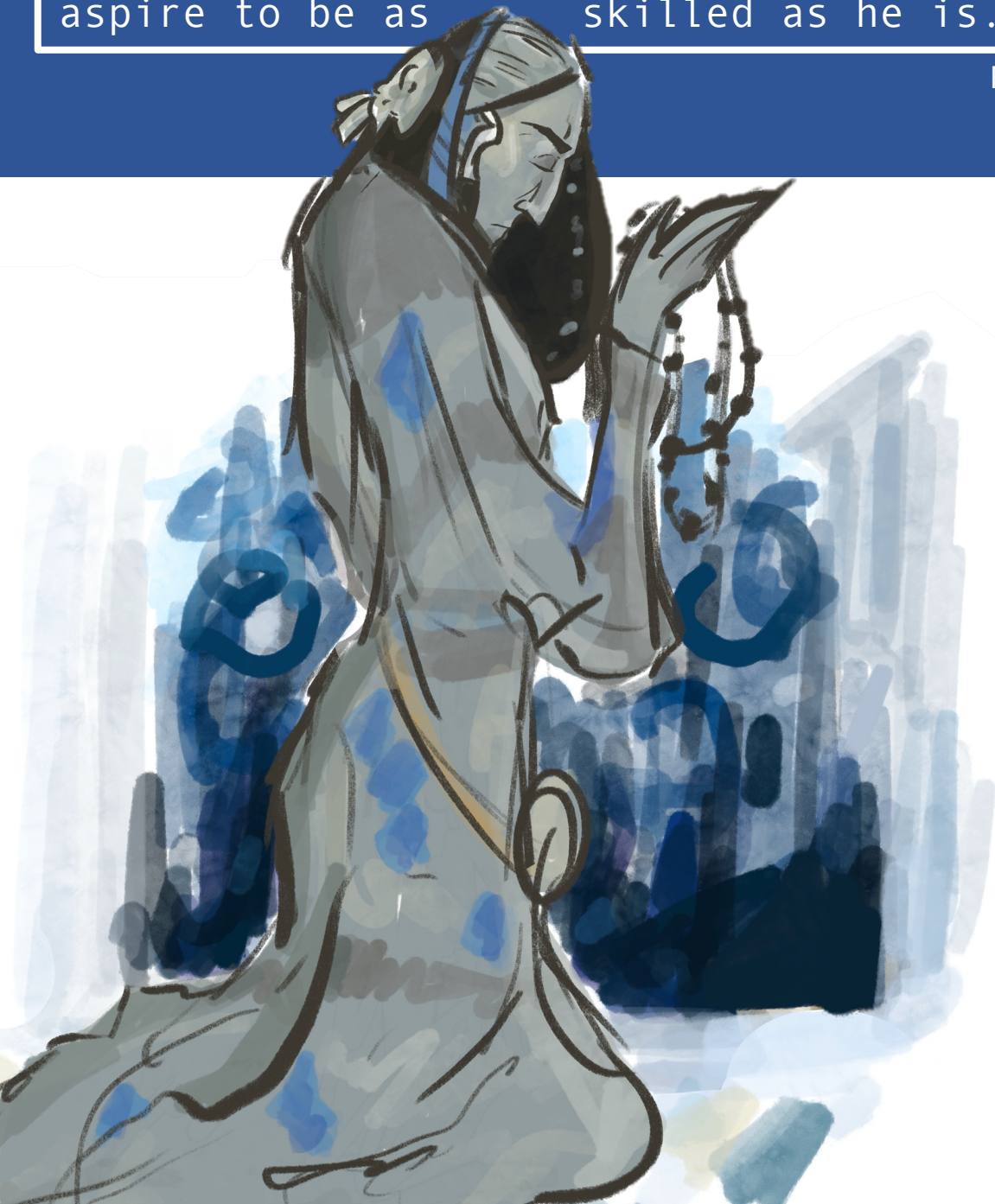


Image by Rachel Woodhouse