

Jean Earle

'Juggged Hare'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Jean Earle was born in Bristol in 1909 but grew up in the Rhondda where her father worked as an architect and surveyor, and spent most of her life in Wales, after marrying an engineer whose work took him all over the country. ‘I’m English but *I feel Welsh*’, she told an interviewer in 1996 (1).

Although she wrote from childhood, like a surprising number of women of her generation, Earle came late to publication; she brought out her first collection in her early seventies to swift acclaim. For all her popularity with readers, her work has never enjoyed the attention which its spry and meditative style invites and rewards. This seems strange, for a writer who drew openly on an intimate and affectionate knowledge of the culture and traditions of the country she was happy to call home. Place, and the resources of memory (like a faith she described as buried below a deep layer of doubt) was more important to her than gender: again like many of her female peers, she was suspicious of political positions and ‘isms’ (2). Her poems prefer to seek out traces of the revelatory, epiphanic or enchanted in the ordinary; the kinds of mundane events and routines she gently opens to transforming scrutiny are more often than not located explicitly in the quietly rural, frequently gendered, Wales which represents the places she grew up in.

Earle’s first collection of poems (*A Trial of Strength*) appeared in 1980. It was succeeded by four more: *The Intent Look* (1984), *Visiting Light* (1987), *The Sun in the West* (1995) and *The Bed of Memory* (2001). A *Selected Poems* was published in 1990. Jean Earle died in 2002. Her work has been included in a number of influential anthologies, including *Twentieth Century Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (ed. Dannie Abse, Seren) and *Welsh Women’s Poetry 1460–2001* (ed. Katie Gramich, Honno).

(1) ‘Memory is like Company’, *New Welsh Review*, 33 (1996), 42.

(2) ‘Memory’, 44.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'Jugged Hare' appears among a group of 'new poems' included in Earle's *Selected Poems*, published in 1990. The title refers to a traditional way of cooking game or fish, in which the whole animal, cut into large pieces, is stewed slowly in a sealed pot. Conventionally the dish is thickened with the hare's own blood, and served with port, a sweet fortified (red) wine. It is worth knowing that a number of ancient cultures ascribed the hare sacred or magical powers, and that – as well as being widely constructed in folklore as a trickster, sometimes benign, sometimes not – in classical sources the animal is associated (along with rabbits) with love and its deities.

'Jugged Hare' offers a touchingly detailed portrait of a mother remembered in the act of preparing the dish of the poem's title for her husband. The poem uses the memories it recovers to examine as well as honour the creative purpose and determination of the woman it places centre stage, while obliquely protesting at the way her domestic circumstances define and seem to confine her. It is tempting to imagine that the voice of the poem belongs to Jean Earle herself, and that the woman under scrutiny is the poet's own mother, but there is no direct or explicit evidence of this link. It does not seem particularly helpful to tie any of the characters to an actual family context or story.

For the most part, the poem's language is direct and straightforward; it uses the vocabulary of the child who reports the events it recounts. Towards its end, as the speaker's perspective shifts to that of the adult recovering a childhood memory, the word use grows more sophisticated.

Form.

'Jugged Hare' is lightly, rather than elaborately, formal. It falls roughly into two halves. Each half comprises three loosely built stanzas (or parts), each one 'end-stopped', or brought to a distinct and definite close by a full stop. The two halves are separated from each other by the single isolated line which marks the poem's centre.

The first three stanzas, which introduce the scene, the woman, and the process she is absorbed in, are all six lines long. The last three stanzas, in which the poem's reflection on that peaceful domestic scene grows broader and implicitly darker, are seven, nine and five lines long respectively. In this variance, the poem's form helps to trouble both the apparently calm scene it starts by describing, and the relationship that the meal seems intended to celebrate.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-4.

The opening stanza immerses us in the main scene of the poem: the work which goes into preparing the meal. A **'jugged'** stew needs freshly caught game, partly because the cooking method makes use of the animal's own blood. Hanging the catch upside down means that the blood collects in the chest cavity, from which it can be (relatively) easily drained and collected. The poem's first lines emphasise the woman's emotional connection with the hare, partly by telling us about her grief, and partly by giving an animal which is venerated in rural tradition a tender-seeming nickname: **'She mourned the long-ears / Hung in the pantry'**. The effect of the nickname is powerful, not only because it seems so affectionate; it also deftly conjures the visual image of the hare's ears hanging (long) beneath the rest of its corpse.

The animal's beauty, both heightened and made pitiable in death, is discreetly emphasised by the details of its **'shot fur'**: **'shot'** recalls the lustrous depth of colour and texture of 'shot silk' (fabric as costly as it is beautiful), as well as hinting at the manner of the hare's death. These ideas re-echo in the aurally-linked 'soft' embedded in **'Softly dishevelled'**, and the woman's instinctively caring response: **'She smoothed that'**. The line break which interrupts this response with the contrastingly ugly activity of **'gutting'** (which likewise interrupts the smoothing – or stroking – of the hare's fur) silently suggests that this cook must harden herself against her natural compassion in order to carry out her brutal task.

Lines 4-6.

The stanza's closing two and a half lines hint at a wider context for the meal, and the woman's reasons for embarking on it. The observation that her work **'Sicken[s]'** confirms that the task is physically as well as emotionally difficult. We begin to realize that we are witnessing – perhaps being asked to bear witness to – someone of particular strength of character and resilience; in the space of barely half a line we learn that her motives for putting herself through a task she seems to find repugnant are driven by feeling for her husband: **'she would rather / Sicken herself, than cheat my father...'**

In the context of marriage, the word **'cheat'** carries perhaps unusual force. Certainly it suggests the extent of the love or sense of responsibility which wife must feel for husband, given the 'sicken[ing]' work involved in making **'his jugged hare'**. Equally we might note the use of the possessive **'his'** in the stanza's final line. Does it honour **'his'** work, in (perhaps) having caught the hare? In doing so, does it hope somehow to distance – partly exonerate, or excuse – the woman from any involvement in (or desire for) the hare's death? Does the emphasis on **'his'** stew even (still more subtly) suggest an undue degree of possessiveness in the head of this household?

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 7-12.

The second stanza returns to the personality of the cook at work in her kitchen. The parallel between the hare, and the speaker's **'tender', 'freakish'** mother is explicitly if briefly drawn, only to be rapidly undermined by the **'resolute'** streak we have already seen in action. To be **'resolute'** is to be possessed by and fixed (or resolved) on achieving a particular purpose. The poem obliquely contrasts this aspect of the woman it studies with the **'mad March hare'** of rural folklore.

The hare's reputed madness refers to the courting behaviour, occurring in spring, of the normally shy brown hare: the female forces a suitor to defend and prove himself by standing on her hind legs and **'boxing'** him with her forepaws. A leaping courtship pursuit or **'dance'** usually then ensues, in which the stamina of the hopeful male is put to the test.

It doesn't seem coincidental that the poet decides here to return our attention to the woman's determination, and capacity to override her compassion for the hare: **'She peeled it to its tail. / Oh, fortitude!'** Simultaneously, and by way of explanation, the text intertwines ideas of romance and courtship into the sometimes gruesome practical detail of the cooking process, as when the cook's sparkling **'rings'** are conjured against the (presumably bloodied) **'newspaper wipes'**.

The combining of blood and expensive port in the stew's famously rich **'gravy'** finds other suggestive echoes. The word **'Sacrificial'** helps point us towards both pagan and Christian religious practice: the Christian Eucharistic feast pays tribute to Christ's sacrificing of his body and blood in the symbolic blessing and sharing of bread and wine). We might be struck just as forcibly by the sense that the feast marks some kind of self-sacrifice, of her nurturing instincts if nothing else, on the part of the speaker's mother. If there is a kind of ritualism about the preparations, the poem's readers might be being gently reminded of the rural superstitions in which hares are linked with witches and witchcraft. It was believed that hares could turn into witches, and vice versa, as and when escape or disguise seemed necessary.

Lines 13-18.

A poem which carefully avoids seeming judgemental perhaps comes closest to criticism in this third stanza, just ahead of the pivotal single line at the text's centre. The speaker chooses this moment to suggest the influence exerted by husband and marriage over the mother, and by extension how far (as the speaker reveals) the mother is prepared to stage-manage its rhythms and patterns **'On high events ... / Dramas, conciliations -'**.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 13 - 18 (continued).

'**Conciliation**', or making up, acknowledges that this household suffers and survives the same tensions as any other. On the other hand, these lines offer an interestingly equivocal amplification, or filling out, of the previous stanza's (brief) invitation to think of the mother as victim of her husband's desires. Picking up now, perhaps, on the folkloric belief in the shape-shifting hare and its trickster-like powers of magic and enchantment, the poem's protagonist is pictured as enjoying her power to control aspects of the family's domestic life, even if this is limited: '**as a child plays house**'.

It is now, perhaps ironically, that her own watching child (a girl, the poem will eventually hint) is caught up in the work: '**She sent me out / To bury the skin**', while the heart is '**Tossed ... to the cat.**' The carelessness of this last gesture, from a figure we know is far from heartless, perhaps haunts the remainder of the poem.

Line 19.

The five short and simple words of this single sentence, arranged on its own separate line, break open the three stanzas which precede it. At its most obvious, the metaphor of a river in flood ('**spate**'), threatening to burst its banks, ascribes to the cook/mother, swept up in her own creative energies, a near-ungovernable power: her strength of purpose seems to make her unstoppable, forceful to the point of destructive violence, indomitable, and (equivocally) the more admirable in and for that.

Lines 20-26.

The several dialogues which the poem has now set up (between domesticity/food and romance/love; creativity/care and destruction/violence; and between pagan ritual and Christian self-sacrifice) are brought powerfully together in its second half. In the concluding three stanzas, our focus turns from the not always palatable preparation of the stew to the theatre '**framing**' its consumption, '**dished up on willow**'. '**Willow**' seems likely to refer to the mass-produced blue and white crockery which became popular in the 19th century (*chinoiserie* was a kind of art deriving from ancient China), the images of which are supposed to represent a tragic story of romantic love.

Once again the poem brings the speaker's memory alive with sensual detail touched, like the lingering '**Fragrance of wine and herbs**', with religious feeling. The sanctifying smell of the stew not only blesses the kitchen; the hare is depicted as having been '**braised by God**' Himself. Less obvious, but perhaps more significant, is the return to the idea of the wife and mother as artist or enchantress, using her creativity in ways which extend well beyond the culinary. Here she is made to seem more painter than witch, skilled in the use of the 'frame' to orchestrate what her remembering child (drily) terms the '**One-off scenarios**' which help her control the dynamics of her marriage.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 27–30.

The penultimate and longest of the poem's seven stanzas is also perhaps its most enigmatic. The stanza begins by considering the immediate effects of the **'feast'** on the man – and behind him the partnership – for whom the stew was made with such determination and **'fortitude'**. The stew is explicitly credited with having ignited a physical, even sexual, response:

After the feast, my father was a lover

Deeply enhanced.

I heard them go to bed,

Kissing – still inside her picture.

These simply-phrased lines don't bother with elaborate language or flowery metaphors, and seem only the more forceful for that. Above all, they dramatise the extent of the mother's power – vested in perhaps more than her stew-making – over her husband. This impression is deepened, if also ironised, by the suggestion of the speaker (sounding at this point more adult than child) that it is in fulfilment of her **'picture'** that the mother has made the stew, in order to ignite the passion in her husband which serves to transform him, enhancingly, into spellbound **'lover'**. In this way the wife's stage-managing of the lovemaking which follows the feast, seems somehow less tender catalyst of consummation, than triumphant *denouement* of all that has preceded it.

At this point the poem hovers between accusation and tribute: confirmed as deliberate architect of her **'picture'**, and to some extent the circumstances of her own life, do we want to think of wife and mother as a self-hardened, self-interested, cunning sorceress, or as a hopelessly romantic loving artist? The speaker stops short of another question: how far the scene her mother constructs for herself and her husband **'Kissing ... inside her picture'** differs from the presumably less passionate realities of life outside that picture, and how she might feel about that. Whose, we might be tempted to ask, are the desires which the meal is intended to assuage: her own, perhaps, as much as her husband's?

Lines 31–38.

That the woman desires something beyond the love-making which the stew prompts, is suggested by the misery she suppresses until her husband has fallen asleep, **'Stunned with tribute.'** The child's sensitive but also naïve assumption, that what she hears are sobs of guilt for the hare and its fate, hints at her youth. If the hare's sacrifice has haunted the 'drama' throughout, the poem's conclusion confirms that another witness might question the extent to which the meal and its ending fulfilled the cook's first purposes. Was it made to pay sincere **'tribute'** to her husband and the mutual loving relationship in which their conjoined lives and the domestic wellbeing of the household are anchored? To revive and renew that same relationship, perhaps worn and tired by use and familiarity?

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 31-38 (continued).

More seriously still, the weeping might be read as an expression of desperation, sparked by the re-intrusion of reality: **'Outside her frame'** awaits ordinary, anti-climactic, life. Perhaps the largest, and least answerable, question which the poem asks, then, is about the mood in which she weeps. With sadness at the brevity of the interlude, the passion, which the stew helped bring about; the loss of the romance, as excitement and pleasure gives way to sleep and love itself recedes? Was the meal, in fact (and to her now adult child, understandably) a means of assuaging her own physical desires?

The last line of this penultimate stanza runs on, across the stanza break, helping to emphasise the gap between the suppressed weeping in the darkened house at the day's end, and the possible causes on which the final stanza reflects. The speaker's sense that **'marital skills'** might be hateful, even despicable, and **'lady-hands'** duplicitous (delivering both brutality and love) licenses us, in turn, to wonder whether she weeps in disappointed or frustrated knowledge of the cost of the **'One-off scenarios'** she arranges? Or perhaps for the predicament of her idealistic imaginative caring self, which must be steeled, repugnantly, to **'flense a hare / Because she wooed a man'**? The speaker's use of the verb 'to flense', a now archaic term for stripping or skinning (usually an animal's meat from its fat or skin), lends the mother a rare or special skilfulness which makes her seem almost exotic, and her powers perhaps stronger and more mysterious, for all that she seems to regret them.

Lines 39-40.

The poem's stark final lines help underpin its overriding ambivalence. Here, finally, a plainly adult speaker recognises both the depth of the gesture which the stew and its preparation makes to the waiting family, and the unacknowledged demands that meal, relationship and domestic life must have made on the imaginative, creative, sensitive being – artist/author/enchantress – at the heart of the household. It is to the complexities, emotional as well as practical, of the situation that the speaker, poem and poet together pay tribute.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

Jean Earle's portrait of a mother's devoted and selfless (if not necessarily entirely loving) nurturing ('sustenance') of her marriage in the early twentieth century offers a sympathetic but also unvarnished portrait recovered with as much scepticism as respect. The poem implicitly takes a less forgiving view of the gendered power relations which govern the life, habits and expectations of the woman it studies, and that are likewise woven through the domestic world it seems to suggest she has created.

Straightforwardly, the poem might be read as an elegy for the hare. It also seems a sympathetic testament to the hidden complexities of the marriage partnership the speaker conjures, with affection but also insight, from memory. In some ways the implicitly critical strand which runs through the poem, emerging most powerfully in those economical final lines, helps to hold the text and its equivocal implications together. We cannot know the precise cause of the weeping which the speaker remembers overhearing, still less what that unhappiness might suggest about the mother's feelings about her situation. However, the poem also leaves us in little doubt of the speaker's suspicion that to some extent, if forgivably, the woman can be held at least partly responsible for the position in which she is pictured, for all the softness and sensitivity we glimpse in her. If she gives her labour, time and energy freely, she seems implicitly aware that there might be other ways to personal fulfilment, and – being, we know, **'resolute'** – to have decided against them. Indeed, by the end of the poem, we are invited to think of this **'freakish'**, admirable woman as being as helplessly trapped in (her blood metaphorically drained by) the deadening necessities of her domestic existence, as the hare was trapped by its hunter.

Both animal and mother, then, can be understood as victims – in their different ways – of the man whose desires are framed in and called into question by the poem. The resonances deepen when they are extended to encompass the cooking method which is (superficially) the poem's chief concern, and the parallels between the methods of preparing and cooking the hare itself, and the life of the speaker's mother. The poem implicitly suggests that the woman is herself **'jugged'** (cooked slowly in her own blood in a sealed cooking pot) by the constraints of her life, circumstances and her devotion to her husband and family. And it is in this process, in the same way that the hare is transformed into a feast of magical (aphrodisiacal) powers, that she somehow maintains her own creative powers of control and enchantment, and sustains herself, her marriage and the family through them.

FOUR QUESTIONS PUPILS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

How does the poem ask us to view the woman it places centre stage? Critically? Or with sympathy? Why might it matter?

The reading above suggests that the poem draws a parallel between the **'tender'**, **'freakish'** woman, and the hare she is preparing to stew. What evidence can you find to support this claim?

Why do you think the speaker (and/or poet) might want to draw such a parallel? What difference might it make, or not, to your own sense of the poem's implications?

Jean Earle often wrote in 'free verse'. What do you understand this term to mean and how does it seem to describe the form of the text discussed here? Why and how might 'free verse' seem suited to the ideas and implications of 'Jugged Hare'?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5 (links active August 2018)

All links are clickable

A photograph of the front cover illustration of Earle's Selected Poems, published in 1990.

- <https://www.serenbooks.com/productdisplay/jean-earle-selected-poems>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

There are very few scholarly materials available on Jean Earle and her work. This poem is briefly discussed in *A History of Twentieth Century British Women's Poetry*, by Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle (p. 247). Interviews with Earle appeared in *Poetry Wales* in 1981 (No. 17 issue 1, with Sandra Anstey) and in *New Welsh Review* in 1996 (No. 33, with Katie Gramich).

A more recent tribute to Earle appears here:

<http://greghill.website/JeanEarle/JeanEarleHorizon.html>

All links are clickable

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R. S. Thomas

'Evans'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Ronald Stuart Thomas was born in Cardiff in March 1913, though he was brought up in Holyhead; his father, who had been a merchant seaman during the Great War, worked on the ferries between Holyhead and Dublin. Thomas won a scholarship to the University College of North Wales in Bangor, where he studied Classics, graduating in 1935. After a year at St Michael’s Theological College, Llandaff, Cardiff, he was appointed to be curate at Chirk (1936–40), where he met the painter Mildred Elsie Eldridge, then teaching art at a nearby school.¹ They were married in 1940 and moved to Tallarn Green, near Wrexham, where R. S. Thomas became curate.

It was at this point that he looked west, towards Wales:

And from there, in the evening I could see the Welsh mountains some fifteen miles away, magical and mysterious as ever. I realized what I had done. My place was not here on this plain amongst these Welsh with English accents and attitudes. I set about learning Welsh so as to get back to the real Wales of my imagination.²

That last phrase is obviously a richly ambiguous one: Thomas very much creates his own romanticised vision of ‘Wales’: for him it is simple, rural, a place where people can live in close harmony with the natural world and, ultimately, with God. (In ‘The Moor’, published in the 1960s, he writes of walking in the Welsh countryside: ‘It was quiet. / What God was there made himself felt, / Not listened to, in clean colours’.³ Of industrial, and post-industrial, south Wales Thomas says very little and what he does say is negative.) Although he had been brought up as English-speaking, Thomas became a fervent Welsh nationalist. He saw the Welsh language as expressing a culture that was distinctive from that of England, which he consistently associated with the modern, materialist, industrial world which had no place for the spiritual and the imaginative life which Thomas valued.

(1) See Matthew Jarvis, ‘R. S. Thomas “A Marriage”’, *A Help-sheet for Teachers*, p. 4. swansea.ac.uk/crew/gcse-resources/gcse-resources-2020/r-s-thomas-a-marriage/ Through their long marriage and indeed after her death, Thomas wrote many poems to his wife. See R. S. Thomas, *Poems to Elsi*, ed. Damian Walford Davies (Bridgend: Seren, 2013).

(2) R.S. Thomas, *Autobiographies*, ed. Jason Walford Davies (London: Dent, 1997), pp. 1-16.

(3) ‘The Moor’ is in the *Library of Wales* anthology *Poetry 1900–2000* ed. Meic Stephens, pp. 145–46.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

In 1942 Thomas had his wish to move west: he was appointed to be vicar at Manafon, a farming community near Newtown in mid-Wales. He had been writing poetry since his student days but it was mainly a poetry of rather sentimental rural descriptions and very old-fashioned in style. His poetry changed dramatically when he moved to Manafon, partly from his reading, encouraged by Elsi, of more Modernist poetry, but mainly the change arose from the situation he found himself in: the middle-class priest having to minister to a community of unsophisticated farmers and agricultural labourers, like Evans in the poem. His poetry shows him struggling to understand these people and his new environment.

In 1954 he was made vicar of Eglwysfach, near Aberystwyth. He was expecting it to be a more Welsh-speaking parish than Manafon but found that a significant portion of his parishioners were retired, middle-class English people, several of them retired military officers; relations between this group and their vicar, a Welsh pacifist, were not easy. These years were some of his most troubled, spiritually and imaginatively, and he looks back in a number of poems to his time at Manafon, to what now seemed the more authentic life of the Welsh hills. Some of these were nostalgic while others, like 'Evans', reflect his state of mind, arising from his difficulties as a vicar in Eglwysfach.

The main development in this period was a sharpening of his awareness of the political situation in Wales. This was the period of the founding of Cymdeithas yr Iaith Cymraeg (The Welsh Language Society) which began to fight for the revival of the Welsh language and it is the period of some of Thomas's most nationalist poems, including 'Reservoirs' (which alludes to the flooding of the Welsh-speaking village of Capel Celyn to create the reservoir at Trewern, to provide water for Liverpool).⁴ Thomas became active in campaigning on behalf of the Welsh language and his sometimes strident nationalism added to the tensions between Thomas and some of his parishioners at Eglwysfach.

In 1967 Thomas became Vicar at Aberdaron, at the far tip of the Llŷn Peninsula. The parish was mostly Welsh-speaking. Thomas continued to write and campaign on behalf of the Welsh language but he did so mainly in prose and in Welsh. From the volume *H'm* (1972) onwards, his poetry is mainly concerned with wider issues such as consumerism and militarism (he was active in the campaign against nuclear weapons) and all those influences in modern life which he saw as stifling the individual's imagination and spiritual existence. After his retirement from the Church in 1978, Thomas's poetry becomes even more focused on religious themes, but this is certainly not a poetry which tries to persuade the reader into belief in the Christian God. Indeed, the poetry of these later years is a frequent anguished struggle on his part to believe in God, a God who seems always to be elusive, usually seems to be absent, and may not exist at all. It is a poetry born out of R. S. Thomas's own struggle to understand God.

(4) 'Reservoirs' is in *Poetry 1900-2000* ed. Meic Stephens, p. 147.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'Evans' was published in R. S. Thomas's poetry collection *Poetry for Supper* (London: Hart-Davis, 1958). By then he had moved from his first parish, Manafon, to become the priest at Eglwysfach, near Aberystwyth. But the description of the location of Evans's home, his '**stark farm on the hill ridge**', suggests rather the hill farms of Thomas's former parish. In other words, the poem is essentially a recollection – we notice that the poem is in the past tense – of an episode that took place some years previously, in the hill country above Manafon. Thomas's biographer, Byron Rogers, notes that Thomas, as parish priest, recorded the death of 'William Evans' in the parish newsletter: '6 February [1947], the burial of William Evans aged 49 years. Mr. Evans had had a long and trying time in bed after his fatal accident'.⁵ Here the parson gives the bare facts; in the poem, years later, we get not only a more emotionally-detailed account of 'Evans' but also a sense of the poet-priest's own deep feelings.

Though it is not said in the poem, we assume that the poet is visiting Evans, who is evidently confined to his bed, in the role of parish priest, visiting one of his parishioners. This was a role which Thomas fulfilled of course in all his parishes, providing not only company but sometimes bringing food and, for those nearing death, spiritual comfort, including on occasion holy communion. In this situation it might seem rather blunt even cold to refer to the man as simply 'Evans' (rather than the more courteous 'Mr. Evans' or by using his Christian name). In fact, though, the poet's use of the surname almost certainly indicates informality. It is likely that this is how the priest knew him and indeed since this is likely to be how the farmer was known in the small rural community. The use of this common Welsh surname also assists the poet in making him a representative figure rather than writing a more specific, biographical poem about 'William Evans'.

(5) Byron Rogers, *The Man Who Went into the West: The Life of R. S. Thomas* (London: Aurum, 2006), p. 154.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Form.

The poem is written in two stanzas, the first of nine lines and the second of seven. Though it is not a sonnet (an eight-line 'octave' followed by a six-line 'sestet'), there is a 'turn' akin to that which occurs between the two parts of a sonnet, a shift of thought or perspective. There is, however, nothing of the intricate rhyme scheme that characterises the sonnet form. In 'Evans' not only are the lines unrhymed but only the final line of each stanza ends with a full stop, adding to the demarcation of the two elements of the poem. (After the opening question, '**Evans?**', the first stanza is syntactically one sentence.) The fact of the lines not ending with a full stop or even the pause of a comma gives a sense of the flow of the poet's thoughts as he recalls Evans. The slight pause as we move our eye from the end of one line to the beginning of the next can also cause emphasis to fall on the initial word of the next line: for example, '**Whine**', '**Dark**', '**Weather-tortured**' and, importantly in my reading of the poem, '**I**' in the penultimate line of the poem. There is a further full stop midway through the second stanza (line 13). The effect of the pause is to give further emphasis to '**Weather-tortured**' but it is also the point at which the focus of the poet's recollection moves from the external scene to the inner world of the poet's thoughts and feelings.

Lines 1-6.

The poem opens, strikingly, with a question: '**Evans?**' It might seem as if we join the poem in the midst of a conversation: someone has just asked the poet about Evans and the question gives rise to the recollections that follows; the poem is essentially a dramatic monologue. Alternatively, the thought of Evans may have arisen for some reason in the poet's mind and, again, the memory follows. If we accept the second reading - and given the personal nature of the thoughts in the second stanza, one might favour this reading - then the poem is an *internal* monologue. Either way, we are overhearing the poet's thinking, the movement of his mind as he recalls the scene and the anguish it caused him.

The linguistic register in these lines - and indeed throughout the poem as a whole - is simple, direct and frequently monosyllabic. The plainness of the language is enhanced by the nature of the hard consonants employed: '**bare**', '**gaunt**', '**black**'. The language seems entirely appropriate to, and evocative of, the interior of Evans's bare kitchen. A more elaborate multisyllabic register, a more formal or lyrical 'literary' language, would be less suitable. The description of Evans's home, the '**bare flight of stairs**', the '**gaunt**' kitchen, tells us of the lack of any form of luxury or even comfort in Evans's life. He is a hill farmer, an occupation which does not make him much money. One rather assumes that the floor, like the stairs, lacks a carpet and is composed of flagstones. '**Gaunt**' is more usually an adjective applied to someone's features or bodily physique than to a room. Indeed, the meanings which the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives are: 'slim, not fat'; 'abnormally lean, as from hunger' and even 'haggard-looking', though also figuratively, 'grim or desolate'. That final figurative usage would fit here and gives us, again, a vivid sense of the lack of comfort in the kitchen, which ought to be a place of warmth and homeliness. But the adjectives also perhaps suggest the bed-ridden figure whom the narrator has just left upstairs.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The poem in fact gives us no details as to what is actually wrong with Evans: is he ill or just very old? We know, from *outside* the poem, from the entry in the parish newsletter, written by Thomas and mentioned by Byron Rogers (above), that a William Evans, a farmer in the parish of Manafon, died not of old age, but of an accident, in middle age. But the poem does not refer to the details of William Evans's tragedy. It is important to remember here, as Matthew Jarvis rightly notes in his help-sheet on R. S. Thomas's 'A Marriage', that 'a poem is never a straightforward drawing from life'.⁶ The scene might have been inspired by an actual person, Thomas's memory of the real William Evans providing the germ of the poem, but 'Evans' in the poem is Thomas's literary (re-)construction. By not including specific details about what ails Evans, the situation is generalised. He comes in a way to stand for any number of pastoral visits to the sick and the elderly that R. S. Thomas made and, in the second stanza, his feelings about his capacity to deal with such situations.

Evans' isolation and vulnerability also indicate another way in which he is representative. Thomas was acutely aware of the pressures which the hill farmers were under. Not only were they subject to the hardness of the climate up on the hillside but the soil was poor for the growing of crops (mostly root crops) and the pasture often thin for the rearing of sheep. The farmers were, therefore, economically vulnerable. Evans's simple, '**gaunt**' house is thus fairly typical. As Thomas was aware, the hill farmers frequently went bankrupt and with them went a whole way of life, frequently Welsh-speaking, which Thomas valued for its authenticity and closeness to nature. He records the passing of this way of life in a number of his poems, for example 'The Welsh Hill Country' and the last stanza of 'Those Others'.⁷

The silence of the kitchen into which the narrator steps is emphasised by the few sounds that *are* to be heard: the song of the crickets and the '**black kettle's whine**'. The crickets have come in from the fields outside, presumably seeking warmth; Evans's life is lived close to the natural world. We presume that Thomas had in fact heard crickets in the hillside farmhouses. In rural communities, certainly into the twentieth century, crickets were traditionally considered to bring good luck and were therefore associated with happiness. (Charles Dickens published a short novel entitled *The Cricket on the Hearth* in 1845 in which a character exclaims that 'to have a cricket on the hearth is the luckiest thing in the world!') Whether Thomas was aware of this superstition we cannot know. But if one is aware of it, a degree of irony is set up, given Evans's plight. Indeed, the sound of the cricket '**singing**' in the bare kitchen becomes a rather plaintive one. Relatedly, in other contexts we might imagine the sound of the kettle singing on the fire as one giving a sense of security and comfort, but in Evans's kitchen the kettle is not singing but '**whining**', suggestive of discomfort, unhappiness. And again, we think of the figure up in his bed, alone.

(6) Matthew Jarvis, 'R. S. Thomas "A Marriage"', *A Help-sheet for Teachers*, p. 4.

(7) 'The Welsh Hill Country' and 'Those Others' are in Poetry 1900–2000 ed. Meic Stephens, pp. 138, 143–4.'

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 7-9.

Outside the hillside farm, of course, up **'on the hill ridge'**, there are no street-lights. The darkness which the poet steps out into is almost total. Its presence is in fact emphasised by its being described by the speaker as having a tactile quality; it is so intense that it feels enough to **'smother'** him. The dark seems sufficiently powerful to threaten to suffocate him, almost totally to snuff him out. In fact, **'smother'** suggests to the poet another image of the stifling of one's breathing and thus of one's life, that of drowning, as the darkness is again *felt* rather than seen as a **'thick tide / Of night'**. The image of the darkness as a **'tide'** introduces an association between the darkness and an all-engulfing sea that is picked up in the second stanza, where the darkness is **'filling'** the poet's eyes and mouth. The **'dark'** is seen as a **'tide...Silting'** up the veins of Evans and he is finally left **'stranded'** on a **'lonely shore'**. The imagery of the sea recurs in Thomas's poetry, even when, as in 'Evans', the setting is far inland. See, for instance, the closing stanza of 'Those Others'.⁸ Thomas was of course brought up close to the sea on Anglesey and he admired the maritime life of his father. Here in the first stanza the house seems under siege, like Evans himself, by natural forces which threaten to sweep it away and to reduce it to nothingness.

Lines 10-13.

At the outset of the second stanza the poet's attention shifts from Evans to his own inner thoughts and feelings. Again, the darkness on the hillside outside the farmhouse is seen by the poet as being so dense as to be, as we have noted, a physical presence. The word **'appalled'** might seem to be an unusually strong word to use (though the syntax causes us to anticipate what it is that *actually* appalls him if it is **'not the dark'**). There is something of a linguistic play here: **'appalled'** in everyday use, of course, has the meaning of 'horrified' or 'deeply dismayed'. But the poet has chosen his word carefully for the original meaning of **'appalled'** is 'to be made pale' (cf. 'pallor'). The poet, surely, is suggesting that, in the face of the overwhelming darkness, and the sense of nothingness and disorientation which it suggests, the experience has, paradoxically, made him pale.

(8) *Poetry 1900-2000*, ed. Meic Stephens, p.144.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The next image, **'the drip / Of rain like blood from the one tree / Weather-tortured'**, is in many ways key to the poem's full meaning. We assume that the immediate reference is to an actual tree, solitary out on the rain swept hillside. But the striking comparison of the rain dripping **'like blood'** opens new and important resonance. In the Christian tradition the Cross on which Christ was crucified is frequently associated metaphorically with a tree, an association, of course, with which R. S. Thomas would have been very familiar. The image has Biblical origins. In the First Epistle of Peter, for instance, the apostle refers to Christ bearing 'our sins in his own body on the tree' (1 Peter 2:24). The image is used several times in The Acts of the Apostles; in Chapter 10, for instance, reference is made to Jesus 'whom they slew and hanged on a tree' (Acts 10:39), while in Chapter 13 we are told that, after the Crucifixion, Jesus's followers 'took him down from the tree, and laid him in a sepulchre' (Acts 13:29). The reference to the tree on the Welsh hillside being **'Weather-tortured'** thus transfers to (and reminds the reader of) Christ's torture on the Cross.

Theologically, the idea of the Cross on which Christ was crucified as a tree links with the tree in the Garden of Eden from which Eve picks the apple and brings about the Fall; the death of Christ, the 'second Adam', on the tree/cross redeems the fall of humankind.⁹ Christ's death is a sign of God's redeeming love. Eve disobeys God's injunction not to eat apples from the tree and Adam chooses to collude with her action. They thus cut themselves off from God and condemn humanity to a world of sin and mortality. God shows His loving willingness to forgive humanity by having his son suffer on the Cross, to pay the penalty for the actions of Adam and Eve and thus to redeem humanity. All the human individual must do in order to share in this redemption is to have faith in God and his Son. (The blood falling from the tree at the Crucifixion hints at the wine of the communion, another sign of redemption.)

Lines 13-16.

Again, the poet employs the imagery of the profound darkness outside the farmhouse to describe the plight of Evans, left alone in his bed: once more the dark is seen as so intense as to be physical, tactile. Associated with the smothering **'thick tide'** seen in the first stanza, the darkness now has connotations of death, **'silting'** up Evans's veins, clogging the flow of his life blood as he lies as if cast up on an empty shore. We notice the word **'vast'**; Evans is seen as alone, helpless, in a seemingly empty, Godless universe in which he appears to have little significance. The darkness suggests a universe which is devoid of meaning or values.

(9) The connection between the Cross/tree and the tree in the Garden of Eden is also made in a hymn with which Thomas would have been familiar, 'Sing, my tongue' (Hymn 95 in the English Hymnal, 1933): 'God in pity saw man fallen, / Shamed and sunk in misery, / When he fell on death by tasting / fruit of the forbidden tree; / Then another tree was chosen / Which the world from death should free'. The hymn is a translation of a sixth-century hymn, 'Pange lingua'.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

It is the realisation of this situation which had '**appalled**' Thomas. (Again, we note the use of the past tense. The whole episode is a memory, one which, it seems, has stayed in the mind of the poet-priest.) The strength of the verb underlines the depth of Thomas's realisation that he has not succeeded in bringing to Evans the spiritual comfort which it was his role, as priest, to bring: the comfort born of the Christian message, that Christ died on the Cross to redeem humanity, including Evans, the message of God's love and of the possibility, through faith, of eternal life. That 'I left **stranded**' suggest his sense of culpability; indeed there is a strong sense that Thomas the priest, in the deep, negating darkness on the Welsh hillside, is as '**alone**' as the man he has left in his '**bleak bed**'. The final image is of one helpless man thinking of the helplessness of another.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'Evans' is very much a poem which is the result of R. S. Thomas's work as a parish priest: to give emotional and often practical support to parishioners who were ill or elderly or simply had personal problems. That support would, of course, be based in the Christian faith which they shared as members of his congregation. But, as 'Evans' shows, Thomas did not always find this role easy. He was by temperament a somewhat reserved man, who did not find it easy to socialise with people he did not know. (In later years, his refusal to be easily accessible to reporters and others in the media earned him the reputation of being 'the ogre of Wales', though there are many accounts of personal kindness to those he knew, including his parishioners.⁹)

'Evans' arises out of his memory of a parishioner at Manafon, in rural mid-Wales, the first parish for which Thomas had responsibility as priest, as opposed to being a curate, an assistant to the priest, as he had been in his previous two parishes. The parish, an agricultural community of small farms, presented him with particular challenges. He was a young priest in his late twenties with limited experience and, as a middle-class university graduate in Classics with one year at theological college, he was quite unprepared for the hard-working, physical way of life with which he was confronted. Years later he still vividly remembered the 'shock' of arriving in the parish:

I came out of a kind of bourgeois environment which, especially in modern times is protected; it's cushioned from some of the harsher realities; and this muck and blood and hardness, the rain and the spittle and the phlegm of farm life was of course, a shock to begin with.¹⁰

Thomas had nothing in common with the lives of the farmers and labourers on the small hillside farms, and yet he was expected to help them not just in their everyday lives but in particularly private times of stress and personal adversity, to give them emotional support and spiritual guidance. The vicar and his wife, of course, were looked up to in the community; the farmers and the agricultural workers and their families would, no doubt, not have felt that they could speak easily and casually to the vicar, though on occasions, as Thomas makes clear in *Y Llwybrau Gynt*, he and his wife were made welcome as guests for the occasional evening meal in the hillside farmhouses.¹¹

(9) See, for instance *Cofio RS: Cleniach yn Gymraeg?* [ed. Gareth Neigwl] (Caernarfon: Gwasg y Bwthyn, 2013), especially the essays by Mary Roberts and Ann Owen Vaughan. Even non-Welsh-speakers may find this profusely-illustrated book to be of interest.

(10) 'R. S. Thomas: Priest and Poet', *Poetry Wales*, Special R. S. Thomas issue, Spring 1972. This is the text of a BBC tv film by John Ormond.

(11) R. S. Thomas, *Selected Prose*, ed. Sandra Anstey (Bridgend: Seren, 3rd 1995), p. 109–110.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

Thomas's early poems came out of this situation: his trying to understand the rural people and to get to know them. In the most famous of these early poems, 'A Peasant', Thomas ultimately shows his admiration for Iago Prytherch, a rural labourer, for his resilience against all that the world throws against him.¹² But the difficulties of communication, on both sides, persisted: in 'They', the parishioners come to his back door (feeling that they do not have the social status to come to the front door of the vicarage), 'And are speechless'.¹³ They have a problem, but do not quite know how to go about talking about it with the vicar.

In 'Evans' Thomas looks back, some years later, to his time at Manafon. The very fact that he does so is surely revealing. The pain of the episode still seems vivid. Presumably, once more, Thomas was unable to establish the kind of intimate communication with Evans that would allow Thomas to bring him true comfort. This, as the last part of the poem suggests, was not simply a matter of the sort of comfort brought about by social conversation but the more profound comfort and reassurance that Evans would have received had the poet-priest been able to convey to him the reality of the Christian message of hope, of the reality of a life hereafter for every individual if they have faith in God's love. We notice that Thomas has walked down from Evans's bedroom '**many times**'; the memory is not of one visit but of many.

The structure of the poem helps convey its theme. The first of the poem's three sentences constitutes the whole of the first stanza, describing in an appropriately simple register Evans's bleak farmhouse on the hillside. The second sentence is composed of two elements both of which, the poet tells us are *not* that which caused him to be '**appalled**'; '**It was not the dark...**' and it was '**not even the drip of rain...**'. The rhetorical structure here raises our expectation. What then was it that so affected him? And then, in the final sentence, comes the poem's climax: what appalled him was not simply the image of Evans, alone as the darkness of death slowly claims him, but the poet's awareness of his own incapacity as priest. And given that the poem is a memory of an episode that took place in the past (we cannot tell how long ago, of course, but the fact that it is a recollection is clear from the first line onwards) we may want to consider what it tells us about the poet's state of mind in the present. Why is he recollecting Evans? It seems, still a priest but now at Egwylsfach, he is still reflecting on his own sense of inadequacy. The poem is entitled 'Evans' but ultimately, it seems, the poem is about the poet and his own wrestling with his capabilities as parish priest.

(12) *Poetry 1900-2000*, ed. Meic Stephens, pp. 137-38.

(13) 'They' is in R. S. Thomas, *Collected Poem 1945-1990* (London: Dent, 1993), p. 203.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

- In what ways does the visit of Thomas the priest suggest the dire circumstances which Evans is in?
- Why does the poet seem so unhappy in the second stanza?
- What connections exist between the imagery of the poem and its themes?
- What is the effect of the poem having no rhymes or even having line endings that stop?

PHOTOGRAPHS

Some striking photographs of R. S. Thomas were taken in his later years by the photographer Howard Barlow. Most of these were taken at the cottage at Sarn Y Plas, Rhiw, at the far tip of the Llŷn Peninsula in north Wales, where he lived in retirement with Elsi Eldridge. (The cottage is owned by the National Trust and there are plans to open it to the public.)

howardbarlow.photoshelter.com/index/G0000jE6mmQLzIgs

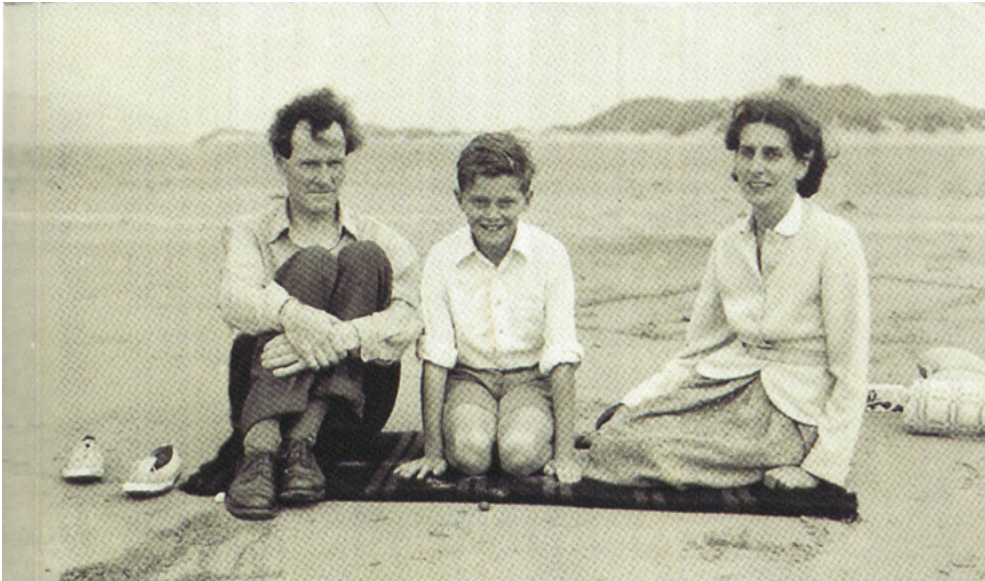


1 R. S. Thomas and Elsi on their wedding day (July 1940, Bala).



2 A drawing of Thomas by Elsi Eldridge (1940s).

PHOTOGRAPHS



3 R. S. Thomas on a family outing with Elsi and their son, Gwydion (1960s).



4 R. S. Thomas at Eglwysfach (1966).

Photographs 1-3 are © Elodie Thomas and by permission of the R. S. Thomas Research Centre, Bangor University.
 Photograph 4 is © John Hedgecoe.

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

An essay on R. S. Thomas's life and work is provided by an American organisation called the Poetry Foundation and is a useful complement to this help-sheet. At the end of the essay you will find links to: (a) a selection of R. S. Thomas poems that are available on-line, and (b) a useful bibliography:

poetryfoundation.org/poets/r-s-thomas

A very informed account of Thomas's life and career by Prof. M. Wynn Thomas is to be found on the site of the 'Dictionary of Welsh Biography': **biography.wales/article/s12-THOM-STU-1913**

A short extract from the television programme *Bookmark*, broadcast in 1995, is available on YouTube, filmed when Thomas was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature (which he did not win).

youtube.com/watch?v=H8v-uc-DI7g&t=3s

A video talk entitled 'Art's Storehouse: The Creative World of R. S. Thomas and Elsie Eldridge' by Jason Walford Davies and Tony Brown, illustrated by numerous pictures and manuscripts from the Archive of the R. S. Thomas Research Centre at Bangor University, is to be found here:

youtube.com/watch?v=fv1Q4Y625fE&t=1301s

A 45-minute radio programme on Thomas by the Welsh author Jon Gower, who knew Thomas well, focuses on Thomas's lifelong enthusiasm for birdwatching and the impact this had on his poetry:

bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b01r5n6g

Some scholarly essays on Thomas and a very substantial bibliography are available on the website of the R. S. Thomas Research Centre at Bangor University:

Bibliography: **rsthomas.bangor.ac.uk/bibl.php.en**

Essays: **rsthomas.bangor.ac.uk/research.php.en**

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All books are available in paperback editions.



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Emyr Humphreys

'From Father to Son'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Emyr Humphreys (1919–2020) was born in Prestatyn, Denbighshire. He was a Welsh writer who wrote in English with a national and international reputation. His works include novels, notable plays, cultural essays, and several poetry collections. However, his creative ambitions were interwoven with a social consciousness that was inspired by Saunders Lewis, a writer, prominent Welsh nationalist and one of the founders of Plaid Cymru. For this reason, Humphreys also spent time as a campaigner following the end of the Second World War.

Humphreys grew up in a predominately English-speaking community. Yet, he learnt Welsh as an adult and subsequently published works in English and Welsh. His father was a schoolmaster who fought in the First World War and was consequently injured in action. It was an injury that would affect his ability to function and participate in society for the rest of his life. It is important to note his father’s injuries were psychological as well as physical. His father’s experiences had a huge impact on Humphreys own views on war which led his involvement with The Peace Pledge Union. This organisation is a non-governmental body that promotes pacifism, based in the United Kingdom. Its members are signatories to the following pledge: ‘War is a crime against humanity. I renounce war and am therefore determined not to support any kind of war’.

In this way, Humphreys established himself as a writer with a strong social and political awareness that reached beyond Wales. His time as a history student at the University College of Wales at Aberystwyth was cut short by war but his commitment to The Peace Pledge prevented him from becoming a soldier. However, he did contribute to the war effort. As a conscientious objector he worked on the land in Pembrokeshire and Caernarfonshire for a short time before moving to London to begin training for Save the Children fund. In this way, he began work at The Red Cross providing humanitarian aid as part of the war effort. Furthermore, following a successful war campaign, he travelled from his post in Egypt to Italy where he worked in a displaced persons camp. His time abroad influenced him and he considered staying in Italy after the war as a result of his time as a relief worker.

Once back in the UK, he gained recognition for his work in promoting Welsh language, culture and literature. He also wrote scripted tv and radio programmes throughout his long and successful career which included working as a BBC Drama Producer and later lecturer on drama in Bangor University.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

Themes of morality and time are present in the poetry of Emyr Humphreys. These ideas are often explored through religious language and symbolism. In addition to this, a non-conformist religion, specifically annibynwyr / independent (Congregationalists) played a crucial role in his outlook on life which in turn influenced his creative work. His poetry focuses on complex and sophisticated investigations into the human condition, reflecting on the cynicism of war and frequently examining the loss of human autonomy and rights. 'From Father to Son' is an example of this interest where the injuries of the father are ambiguous, and Humphreys could easily be referring to physical as well as psychological '**wounds**'.

Humphreys first novel was *Little Kingdom* (1946), *A Toy Epic* (1958) (originally published in a Welsh-language version, *Y Tri Llais: Nofel*) which was followed by many others. His cultural history of Wales, *The Taliesin Tradition* (1983), explores a literary tradition that begins with the sixth-century poet Taliesin. Most recently, he published a collection of poems *Shards of Light* (2018).

Wales Pen Cymru commenced the Emyr Humphrey Award in 2019 in honour of his centenary year. The aim of the award is to celebrate innovative writing in Wales. In this way, the social responsibility and focus of Emyr Humphreys writing continues to facilitate the success of new Welsh writing talent.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'From Father to Son' is an idiomatic phrase which conjures images of inheritance as well as inherited characteristics through a shared history. Additionally, it evokes images of a gift being passed from father to son. Yet, the ambiguous language of the title suggests that the father and son is not exclusively limited to the poet or speaker's relationship with his own father. For this reason, the title draws in readers by provoking their memory relating to paternal relationships.

Critically, readers should not conflate the poetic voice or perspective with the experiences and history of Emyr Humphreys – however autobiographical the poem may appear – because the ambiguity and non-specificity of the title resists the biographical reading.

Form.

The poem has no formal poetic structure that would be connected to any traditional poetic forms or metres. However, the open verse structure of each stanza reveals a **'hesitant'** father and the way in which memory can overwhelm the mind. For instance, the line breaks which emphasis **'was'** and **'darkness'** reveal tensions between the living man and how his son remembers him, and the fleetingness of that recollection. Furthermore, the uneven lines in the opening stanzas seem to represent the uneven gait of the father. Meanwhile, stanza four is a thicker block of text with stress on **'You may think'** and **'Must embrace'** which is preceded by the flaws and perceived failures of the father. The form of the poem is therefore tied with the human condition in the way it represents the father's disturbed mental state which has led him to be unable to communicate with his son. The speaker, or reader, of the poem may think negatively on their paternal figure yet the reader is advised to **'embrace'** him because, as the poem continues, **'before you touch him / he is gone'**. In this way the poem's form attempts to imitate the human mind, chiefly the way in which people process memory and react to the disillusionment of paternal ideals.

The poem offers readers an insight into a relationship between a father and son. Thus, the character of the father is offered to readers in a series of staggered descriptions. These images are interspersed by the voice of a son who is recollecting decaying memories of his time with his father.

The use of line breaks in each stanza further define the distance between the father and son. For instance, Humphreys commences the poem by offering readers an image of a loving and **'tender'** father figure. However, he immediately threatens these expectations in the following line by introducing the father as a distant figure who **'blows in the outer / darkness'** and is **'hesitant'** towards his son. In this way, Humphreys reveals a relationship which has only isolated the father from the son, and vice versa.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Emyr Humphreys employs repetition which emphasise impressions of a father who is longing to communicate with his son. Yet, he is unable to surmount a paternal distance that has been established and exacerbated by the father and son throughout their lifetimes, and the ways in which it is difficult to discuss turbulent experiences with family such as war. The distance felt by father and son is stressed by the repetition of **'cold'**, **'he comes'**, **'hesitant'** and **'outer / darkness'**. A longing to communicate in the poem is demonstrated in the line **'Unwilling to intrude and yet driven at the point of love / to this encounter'**. In this way, a longing but inability to communicate is one of the key themes of the poem. The father is a figure who comes out of the **'darkness'** with his **'overcoat buttoned to the throat'** effectively muting him at the start of the poem. However, it is also the son who was unable to close the distance between them, and is seeking fulfilment of their relationship now, after the father has died.

From *Father to Son* demonstrate **'a balcony of life'**.¹ This term, defined by Humphreys, describes an approach which is not sentimental but rather **'a form of inclusive, balancing, complicating detachment'**. To elucidate, this term describes an approach that Humphreys attributed to his writing style which he discovered throughout his time in Italy after the Second World War. Also, this creative methodology focused on writing poetry with a detached tone. Thereby, offering readers a balanced view of his subject matter. For this reason, his poetry rarely strays into sentimentality or nostalgia.

Lines 1-3.

The opening lines of the poem introduce a **'tender'** father who is being reanimated by the son's memories. This word also suggests the father was attentive to the emotional needs of the son as **'tender'** is not a word typically associated with paternal figures. Yet, the first reading of **'was'** draws attention to the death of the father. However, the word takes on additional meaning as the poem progresses and readers get to know the father, and his relationship with the speaker, better. Could **'was'** refer specially to the speaker's childhood with the father? In this way, Humphreys scrutinises the maturity of a relationship, from the childhood of the speaker to adulthood, and the intimate encounters and trauma which often make it difficult to communicate with those who exist outside of those experiences.

(1) Tristan Hughes, Wales Arts review News, *'EMYR HUMPHREYS (1919-2020) | TRIBUTE'*, 2020, walesartsreview.org/emyr-humphreys-at-100

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

In this way, the following lines undermine the speaker's memories as the word '**poor**' demonstrates a sociological understanding which is tied with mature language. Additionally, '**poor**' could relate to mining areas in times of depression, connecting the father to wider ideas of Wales, chiefly its tough rural and industrial landscapes. It should be noted that the father emerges as a distinct personality following the opening lines. His clothes and behaviour have many connections to more intimate ties with Welsh society. For example, there is a religious connection to the father when he comes in from outside with his '**overcoat buttoned**', an article of clothing that suggests he has recently arrived home from a formal gathering, while his actions outside the home are never mentioned, it could be from a religious ceremony. An institution which dominated rural Welsh life. Yet, it is only when the father is in his home where his personality begins to take shape, and he can unbutton himself to reveal a '**hesitant**' figure. '**Overcoat**' is a shield from the harsh Welsh weather, but it could also mean a shield against the attitudes of his community. Later in the poem, the father comes at the speaker with '**all his winters and all his wounds**' but the poem makes it clear that he does not expose his trauma to his son easily. Furthermore, the tone of the poem is gentle although the son frequently offers judgement on his father, '**as tender as he ever was**' is supplemented and perhaps modified by '**and as poor**'. The lines are ambiguous: '**as tender as he ever was**' could mean still loving, or that his tenderness is still limited. The reference to his poverty may be an expression of tenderness on behalf of the speaker towards the vision of his father, or a castigation of the father's deficits. The tone of poem is wistful in the sense that it is the speaker who is now seeking closure between himself and his father by evoking memories.

The poem opens with the line, '**There is no limit to the number of times**' suggesting that the speaker has not included many other memories which, perhaps, defined their relationship. In this way, readers are reminded that the speaker's recollection of his father is far from comprehensive. Additionally, '**can come to life**' suggests a haunting gothic quality to the poem which is continued throughout the narrative. The father is being reanimated by the son by evoking these select memories, and it is '**darkness**' from which the father is conjured. Following the opening of the poem, the speaker does not present multiple images of the father enacting different roles or traits. Instead, once '**tender**' he becomes '**hesitant**'. Although the poem doesn't render alternative depictions impossible. However, the repetition and recurring vision rather than the many dimensions of the man are more prominent than his changing features, which are always from the point of view of the speaker.

Enjambment is used throughout these three lines and it is not until the end of line nine where readers encounter a full stop, effectively breaking up the speaker's recollections from his direct communication with the reader using '**You**'. The second line, which begins '**Your father**', redirects memory to engage with readers' own recollections of their fathers, while also introducing an informal tone to the poem (referring to one's father as '**your father**' is a colloquial form of expression). The idea of a man '**come to life**' suggests a reanimation, or reincarnation, of something firmly situated in the past. Yet, a gothic haunting which echoes throughout the poem with '**always blows**', reminds readers that these memories are often evoked by the speaker. In this way, this poem is not an isolated recollection of the father by the speaker but one of many.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Yet the father remains as he was in the past: **'as tender as he ever was / And as poor'** which shows how people are perhaps fixed in memory after a period of time. The vision and repetition of being **'poor'** is a bit odd, and, perhaps, this is where the tension between childhood and adulthood become strained. Humphreys attempt to balance sentimentality with direct observation, or **'the balcony of life'**, is demonstrated through the tensions between a child and adult's perspective of their father. It should be noted that Humphreys own father was a headmaster, a profession with a respectable salary, and, though he may not have had a full career due to health, it proves how unlikely the speaker is Humphreys himself.

Furthermore, while a looser connection to Wales, the emphasis on poverty shares a connection to the imagery of Wales as well as the Welsh national anthem, *Hen Wlad fy Nhadau*, drawing the father closer to the landscape of Wales and the situation of its people.

Lines 4-7.

The stanza continues to describe the father. **'Blue'** could have two meanings, including the more literal one, such as blue from death or the cold of the wind. However, the blueness of death suggests that the father is brought to life through the poem, yet his reanimation will always be incomplete. The father emerges out of the darkness, as if a spectral figure. This ghostly imagery is accentuated by **'outer darkness'** which is a phrase from the Gospel of Matthew. It refers to people who deny the son after the father has revealed him. In this way, the poem shares Christian imagery where the father **'come[s] back to life'** but there is not redemption following his resurrection.

'Hesitant' and **'he comes'** are repeated later in the poem. In this way, this paternal figure is both **'tender'** and **'hesitant'**, while **'encounter'** refers to an unexpected meeting. The poem is chiefly concerned with ideas on hesitancy and the contained desire and uncertainty this word brings to mind, while **'comes'** draws on the image of a slow-moving figure, embodied by the father. It is interesting to note that each character in the poem face difficulties in communicating, even though the poem focuses primarily on the father.

So, the poem centres on memories of the father, however, it is driven by the speaker and the way in which the father reappears as a haunting figure coming out of the darkness. In this way, the poem draws on gothic imagery of haunting and trauma which continue Humphreys interest in the human condition. It is unlikely that the father is a literal ghost. However, this makes the figure of the father even more disturbing in the sense that it is the speaker who is compelled, his mind conjuring the vision seeking a closure that seems impossible given the death of the father. The repetition of tentative and uncertain words reveals a slow-moving and cautious figure and contribute to ideas that it is the speaker who is driven by continuous and unrelenting desire to settle his relationship with the father.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The figure being **'driven'** towards his son carries with him a sense of compulsion and also a sense of the significance of what has remained unsaid, reflecting the remains the unfinished business of ghosts, where **'that love'** comes to an abrupt end. In this way, the motif of haunting and unsettled souls is more ambiguous because the unsettled soul is the speaker, in addition to the father. For instance, the speaker may be haunted by the father but it is his own memories and interactions with the man that define this haunting.

Lines 8-10.

The first line of the second stanza concentrates on the perspectives of the reader through the words, **'You may think'**. The use of enjambment at the end of the line allows the reader to flow into the next while having time to reflect on their experiences with paternal figures.

The word **'love'** appears several times in this poem, however, these words in line 9 are shadowed by line 10 when the portrayal of a father is paused and **'love'** is overshadowed by punctuation. For instance, the comma signals a change of tone and the full stop the completeness of the father's **'wounds'** and the finality of his death. This is emphasised by a comma in the middle of the line. This use of punctuation forces readers to pause and reflect. Thus the full stop reinforces the **'think'** action at the beginning of the stanza. Yet, these lines mark a shift in the poem where the true nature of the man is revealed. Almost as if unbuttoning the coat that the father had so breathlessly walked in wearing at the beginning of the poem.

'Winters and wounds' include alliteration which is continued in the following line with **'stands shivering'**, all of which draw attention to an insecure figure who is unwell and cold, either from the environment or from trauma. Yet, **'winter'** brings to mind images of the cold and snow, as well as the end of a life. So, **'shivering'** also conjures images of blue hands and a flushed weathered face. Yet, the **'wounds'** are never made clear whether they are physical or mental such as depression (**'blue'**). Humphreys's father was gassed in the trenches and he also suffered mental trauma that would probably be recognised as PTSD now. In this way, the speaker is wrestling with memories of his father but the father is wrestling with memories which go back much further, yet have influenced the speaker's perception of the man. This legacy of wounding goes back to the way in which communication between the two, while never openly hostile or toxic, is always suppressed and **'hesitant'**.

The speaker begins the poem with an image of a **'tender'** father but these memories and the actual relationship are overshadowed by the man's trauma, his mental state, as well the **'winters and wounds'** that cut across that love and memory. In one sense, the father therefore comes before his son whole, although not sanitised by memory.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 11-15.

The following lines focus on the image of the father, who is no longer approaching but **'standing'** as if waiting for someone. Emyr Humphreys draws on Christian themes here by presenting memories of the father at the end of his life where individuals are judged and must repent their sins. **'Outer darkness'** could be this judgement where all sins are on show. So, the secular representation of the father here and of him as being without a home draw on religious ideas.

The father is **'shivering'** which is stressed by the alliteration in the line of **'stands'**. In this way, the following line, **'cold'** and **'worn like a tramp'** continues the ambiguous nature of the **'wounds'** of the father. Where **'shivering'** from fear or mental fatigue are equal culprits contributing to the father's state. The image of an **'empty street'** could be read as a representation of life after death where the father is in a state of purgatory. However, we know that the father will be judged for a crime relating to his son because of the previous use of **'outer darkness'** where death is the ultimate unveiling.

The father is **'cold and worn like a tramp'** which is followed by **'the end of a journey'**. It should be noted that a tramp is a figure without a home. This could have associations with PTSD where the sufferer feels displaced from the home environment following his trauma. The end of the journey suggests death and mortality, while the extent to which the father is **'poor'** is given a fresh perspective by using language which recalls difficult travel or being cast away, mentally and through death. Furthermore, while the speaker has not done this, it would be easier for unpleasant memories of the father to be cast off in favour of the more **'tender'** image.

Yet, the father's love is unconditional and it is **'you'** (the reader or the speaker referring to himself in the colloquial second person) who is hesitant to greet the father. In this way, the speaker does not provide the father with the same unconditional love. There is no clear disdain in the poem towards the father but rather a sense of longing and regret that they were unable to communicate when closure could have been provided. However, unquestioning is not the same as unconditional and there's the implication that the speaker wanted to keep the father at a distance, saving him from having to understand, and potentially further undermine, perspectives on the father.

The word **'uneasy'** and **'hesitant'** were used in the previous stanza, but here the context is different because death is specifically used to describe the touch of the father. Not only does the father have **'the cold touch of death'** but also that it must be embraced to bring the meeting to its conclusion. The words **'must'** leaves no option but to step away and accept the haunting realisation that their relationship will never receive adequate closure.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 16–19.

The closing lines are shorter and written in a slower tempo that is controlled with commas and enjambment. The spectral figure of the father disappears before the reader or speaker can capture him. Moreover, the sensory aspect of the poem, chiefly touch, leaves marks on the skin and draws on an elusive tactile experience of memory. In this way, touch establishes a tactile sensory component to memory. Yet, the father is transferred to the fingers of the son – **'his weariness'**, **'his love'** – and, in this way, the son inherits the sins and insecurities of the father. The father is intangible but also leaves traces. This indicates a finality which is stressed in the following short clause of **'he is gone'**. Nevertheless, the father leaves his **'weariness'** but also his **'love'**, which is one of the words repeated throughout the poem. The cycle of life, perhaps the increasing maturity of aging by the son, drives the poem and its **'hesitant'** nature where parental flaws and their decisions are revealed to us as we get older.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The language used throughout the poem animates the father while the son has a predominately passive role. The key theme of the poem is memory, chiefly the communication of memory to the reader. For instance, phrases such as '**come to life**' and '**driven**' suggest that the father is continually busy outside of the home, while inside he is '**hesitant**'. Furthermore, the tension between the father and son is exacerbated by this hesitancy because neither character is willing to reach out completely, and when they do, the touch is cold and distant.

The Christian imagery and allusions in the poem are complex. The father recalls the figure of Christ who is always ready to come '**full of love**' but is '**wounded**' and '**poor**'. The father also takes on the characteristics of one who comes but is unable to fulfil any true act of repentance or fulfilment which the speaker seemingly desires throughout the poem. The allusion to a state of purgatory, or a state of suspension, mentioned above, might apply to father and son. Their situation in the street suggest liminality and a sense of being unhomed or unhomey in the Freudian sense of *unheimlich*: uncanny.

The gothic dimensions of the poem of the haunting, unsettled and displaced humanises the father against the psychological dimensions of the poem. The poem has an unsatisfactory conclusion, where the '**weariness**' is transferred to the son, further repressing him. This is emphasised by the repetition of '**a little more**' as if one step closer would have been enough to begin a communication with the father. However, this is an unrealistic thought because it is the son who would have had to give a little more, as the father came, seemingly, as far as he could, given his trauma which is indicated by '**wounds**'. Arguably, the father is impoverished through the son's perceptions of him, suggested in '**cold**', '**poverty**', '**love**', in addition to inheritance delivered through touch.

Furthermore, the poem has a conversational tone which reaches out to readers to directly engage them and their memories. This is a defining feature of Emyr Humphreys's poetry. However, the language of the poem discusses intimate memories which exist in the mind of the speaker.

'From Father to Son' was one of the eighteen poems published in *Ancestor Worship* (1970), long after the death of Humphreys own father. Its themes of human mortality, inheritance, dis/connections and a fractured sense of love, and the passage of time transcend the autobiographical specificities of the poem.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

- How does the use of **'you'** and **'your'** affect the mood of the poem?
- What is the relationship between the speaker/poet and his father? How do we know?
- Why choose to title the poem *'From Father to Son'*?
- In what way does religion feature in this poem?

PHOTOGRAPHS



Emyr Humphreys, photograph by Bernard Mitchell.

Photographer Bernard Mitchell was born in Morriston, Swansea and has worked in newspapers for thirty years as photographer. Bernard Mitchell is responsible for incorporating and developing the Welsh Arts Archive and holds the copyright to all the images within it: bernardmitchell.co.uk/biography

SECTION 6

(links active June 2021)

All links are clickable

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

You can find more information about Emyr Humphreys on the Wales Literature Exchange:
waleslitexchange.org/en/authors/view/humphreys-emyr

You can find more information about Emyr Humphreys on *Tribute to Emyr Humphreys* on the Seren Books website: serenbooks.com/newsentry/tribute-emyr-humphreys

BIBLIOGRAPHY: FURTHER READING

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Leslie Norris

'His Father, Singing'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Award-winning poet and short story writer Leslie Norris was born at Wern Farm, just outside of Merthyr Tydfil, in 1921 and went on to live in both England and the US. Norris’s youth was spent in Wales during the Great Depression¹ and his family did not have a lot of money. His father fought in World War One then became a coal miner. He lost his job after breaking his back, and then earned a low wage as a milkman during a time when unemployment was at an all-time high.

Norris attended Cyfarthfa Grammar School and earned multiple awards for his academic and sporting achievements. Sport would play an important role throughout his life, chiefly soccer. He took after his father as a precocious student and vivacious reader, and the two would often recite poetry together. In his teens, Norris travelled to nearby towns listening to the poetry readings of Dylan Thomas and Vernon Watkins.

After a brief period in the RAF which resulted in a dismissal due to ill health, Norris decided to support his love of poetry by studying for a teaching degree, which he completed at Teacher Training College in Coventry. His wife, Kitty, was also a teacher. He later went on to teach in Yeovil and Bath before becoming a headteacher in Chichester. In 1973 Norris was invited to become a Visiting Professor and Poet at the University of Washington; this triggered his affinity with America and its rich landscape. By 1983 he had become a Professor of Poetry, and later of Creative Writing, at Brigham Young University in Utah.

Despite leaving Wales in 1948 when he was in his early twenties, Wales and its cultural heritage figured heavily in Norris’s poetry and his short stories, as Stephens points out: ‘it is to the Merthyr of his boyhood, economically depressed but socially vibrant, that he looked back’,² making him an important poet of Wales as both the landscape and society were enmeshed in his work.

(1) BBC, ‘Wales History: War and Depression’, BBC, (2014). bbc.co.uk/wales/history/sites/themes/guide/ch20_part2_war_and_depression.shtml

(2) Meic Stephens, *Poetry 1900–2000 One Hundred Poets from Wales* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2007), p.254.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

An avid contributor to *Poetry Wales*, the national poetry magazine of Wales, selections of Norris's work include *Finding Gold* (1967), *Ransoms* (1970), *Mountains Polecats Pheasants* (1974), *Islands off Maine* (1977), *Water Voices* (1980), *Sequences* (1988) and *A Sea in the Desert* (1989). Norris won the Poetry Society's Alice Hunt Bartlett Prize in 1970; the David Higham Memorial Prize; the Katherine Mansfield Memorial Award and the Welsh Arts Council Senior Fiction Award. His success as a poet led to him becoming resident poet at Eton College, and in 1984 he was considered for the role of Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom, a post that later went to Ted Hughes.

Aside from visits for festivals and conferences, including the Hay Festival, Norris never returned permanently to Wales, despite having a second home there until 1989. Survived by his wife Kitty, Norris died at Provo, Utah on 6 April 2006.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The title of Leslie Norris's 'His Father, Singing' arouses many questions: why is the father singing? What is he singing?

The possessive pronoun '**His Father**' immediately evokes the father and son relationship, which becomes more pertinent as the poem develops. However, use of the third person is unsettled by the poem's opening line that uses the first-person possessive pronoun '**My father**', making it apparent that the speaker is referring to his own father. Despite this, the formal connotations attached to the noun '**father**' adds to the dislocation between father and son that has already been created using the third person in the title.

The act '**to sing**' has varied implications which relate to celebrations as well as funerals. However, given Norris's experiences of war, as well as those of his father's, it is likely that the poet was aware of the role of song in a soldier's life. For instance, song was often used to bolster morale as well as convey some of the horrors of the trench in a less threatening way for those living through it. In this way, '**to sing**' is a means of celebrating culture, commemorating the fallen and establishing a connection to Wales through the history of song. Given that Norris's poetry often contains traces of Wales, it should not escape us that the title also echoes the singing tradition of Wales and even its Welsh anthem, 'Land of my Fathers'.

Form.

The form of the poem is fourteen regular stanzas of four lines (quatrains), with irregular use of end-stopped and enjambed lines. There are also frequent and irregular use of the caesura throughout the poem, which creates a stop-start rhythm, possibly mirroring the intrusive way that the memories of war invade his father's daily life. This staccato rhythm creates a further detachment between father and son. It could also mirror the non-linear thought process of the speaker: he begins by contemplating the reason for his father's singing, before going forth into his father's childhood and wartime experiences, and then describing a very specific time when the father sang. The poem comes from the lyric genre, a 'fairly short poem, uttered by a single speaker, who expresses a state of mind or a process of perception, thought, and feeling',^[1] and Norris reveals the poem's climactic epiphany through a child's process of perception, a child who, when speaking, is now presumably an adult.

(3) M.H.Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Boston, MA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), Eighth ed., p.153.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-4.

The aforementioned shift from the title's third person to the first person places a strain on the father and son relationship, emphasising their possible detachment which elevates the significance of the epiphany at the end of the poem. The speaker then contemplates the reason for his father's singing using a declarative tone to suggest a degree of certainty. However, this is then juxtaposed with the adverb of probability '**perhaps**'. While sadness and poverty are certain, happiness is not and this is reinforced by the speaker's immediate qualification, '**but I'm not sure of that**'. A tone of uncertainty and/or confusion is therefore established by the speaker in this opening stanza.

This is the only stanza in the poem that includes no caesuras and enjambment which means there are no mid-line pauses or free flowing lines; it is also the only quatrain not to be interrupted by a full stop until the end of the stanza's closing line. Could Norris be mirroring the disintegrating mind of the father following his regimented experiences in war through the structural collapse of the poem? Having said this, Norris maintains the four-line stanzas throughout – perhaps to represent the consistent four-piece family that surround him?

Lines 5-11.

These lines place the father singing '**in the garden**', an outdoor domestic space where he can sing '**quietly**', perhaps so that nobody can hear him? The caesura in line six emphasises the quietness of his father, strengthening the climactic epiphany that occurs at the end of the poem through his father's raised voice. The father as a quiet figure is important as it conflicts with him raising his voice at the end of the poem, making the moment even more poignant. Norris uses the image of a wallflower and the superlative '**loved most**' to further characterise the speaker's father, given the idiomatic association of being a wallflower – referring to an introverted person.

Tradition becomes pertinent in these lines, with the mention of '**gillyflowers**', a word passed down from his mother. Norris's use of tradition augments the significance of both time and the past to convey the father's memories. These layers of time (his father's childhood within the speaker's childhood) show how a parent's actions and emotions leave a lasting imprint on their children.

Lines 12-17.

We discover that the songs are part of the father's past. This is demonstrated by the phrase '**before my time**', which recalls one of the key themes of the poem: the importance of an emotionally turbulent past in addition to memory. This significance is further emphasised by the line break between lines twelve and thirteen, which suspends the phrase '**a time**', at the end of the stanza. These songs were sung when his father was a boy alongside his '**musical brothers**'; this phrase holds familial implications. However, use of the noun '**boy**' conveys the innocence of his father's youth, alongside games, songs, and playing, which all have connotations of a carefree childhood.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 18–20.

These lines take on a sinister meaning whilst maintaining the childhood innocence of his father who is described as **'still a boy'** despite being either a teenager or young adult at the time of enlistment. However, the reference to the youthfulness of his father highlights a childhood which was to be broken by war, and the horrors therein. Also, the songs the speaker refer to in these lines are different to the ones referenced in the previous lines – as these are the ones his father sung **'More often'**.

The repetition of **'boy'** implies a continued youth which is juxtaposed by the phrase **'dying songs'**. The reference to **'French mud'** identifies these frequently-sung songs as those learned in the trenches of the western front during the First World War. The mud specifically evokes the horrors of death, decay and disease, as it becomes a synecdoche for the battlefield and/or the trenches, where these horrors took place. The marching songs and popular music of the war become **'dying songs'**: a powerful expression of the boy's loss of innocence and perhaps a metaphor for those boys and men who lost their lives during the war. It also hints at the father's traumatic past which is important for our understanding of the ending of the poem.

Lines 21–25.

Stanza six returns to the domestic scene in which the speaker, his father and his younger brother are alone, the occasion on which, their father **'sang for us once only'**. The absent mother in these lines, away from the domestic space of the home, creates an even greater dislocation within the poem. The gentle alliterative **'lamp lit'** places greater emphasis on this one-off occasion, leading us to see its significance. The speaker then reflects on himself – reading at a young age – developing his knowledge and in some ways, this foreshadows the ending's epiphany moment, where he acquires the more personal and emotional knowledge about his father. The speaker's age is poignant, as there seems to be a cognitive shift underway. Seven is the age where one starts to become more aware of the wider world and to reassess one's place within it and to realise that one's parents might have other lives.⁴ As such, the speaker may not wholly understand what is going on but he is old enough to intuit that it is something significant. The tension between age/youth and the theme of war could be about the effects on the generation of children raised by war veterans. The war continues to cast a shadow beyond 1918 and beyond the trenches.

The image of the **'scrubbed table'** possibly relates to the mother's temporary absence as typically, women were responsible for household chores during the time the poem may have been set. Her presence, yet absence here, could be a way of Norris ensuring that this intimate moment is not shared with the mother as it would be perceived differently by her, an adult – whereas a child's innocence is likely to interpret an adult's suffering in a different way.

(4) Psychology, 'Five-To-Seven Shift', *Psychology*, (2021), psychology.iresearchnet.com/developmental-psychology/cognitive-development/five-to-seven-shift

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 26–29.

This calm and quiet image of the child reading beneath a lamp is disturbed in these lines by the speaker's baby brother crying, emphasised by the consonance of '**cried from his crib**'. This cacophony of sound intrusively lifts the speaker's attention away from his peaceful reading. The physical pain experienced by his brother may foreshadow the emotional pain and anguish the speaker witnesses from his father.

The younger brother's brief '**peremptory squall**' intrudes on the peaceful scene created by the image of the speaker reading beneath a lamp. This could reflect how the grim experiences of war intrude on the father's everyday life. The '**squall**' is a prelude to the '**long wail**': this could mirror the humming of a lullaby as a prelude to the '**wail**' of the father's own voice '**raised [...] in pain and anger**'.

Lines 30–34.

The speaker now returns to the third person, referring to the baby as '**his peevish child**', and by doing so creates a detachment between himself and his previously mentioned '**my brother**'. The transition of the pronouns '**my**' to '**his**' is a reversal of the poem's title and opening line. These shifts in pronouns, whilst creating a sense of detachment, adds to the speaker's growing perception of the world and his surroundings.

The final line of stanza eight offers the paternal image of the father cradling his son '**in a wool shawl**'. This image shares associations with Wales, simply, its indirect reference to sheep, but also its links to the Welsh woollen industry and the tradition in Wales for blankets to be passed down between generations. However, the most important Welsh connection here is that of the Welsh nursing shawl, a practical item that enabled women to work whilst carrying their babies around with them.⁵ However, in this all-male poem, Norris draws attention to how these Welsh cultural artefacts were also worn by men.⁶

It is also at this point in the poem where his father '**began to sing**'. Readers understand this to be a poignant moment between father and sons as stanza six revealed the boys had only heard him sing once. The father is now in the non-descript kitchen, an image which contrasts to later in the poem, yet Norris is reminding us that they are still within the confines of the domestic space.

(5) BBC, 'A History of the World: Welsh Nursing Shawls', BBC, (2014) Available at: bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/objects/G7tAcrGyRZqNVZ3Y-i7DwQ

(6) Carry My Cariad, 'Cwtching up in times gone by', *Carry My Cariad: Wraps, slings and cwtched-up things*, (2014), carrymycariad.wordpress.com/2014/10/23/cwtching-up-in-times-gone-by

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 35–40.

In stanza nine the father retains his quiet persona and begins to sing '**quietly**', mirroring the way he sung in the garden earlier in the poem. His father's quietness could allude to the fact that he does not say much, perhaps on account of his internal suffering? It also alludes to a widespread reluctance to discuss wartime experience. The use of parenthetical commas for '**of course**' emphasises the father's quietness, but also suggests that this was a well-known trait which is further accentuated by the repetition of '**quiet**' throughout the poem.

The speaker describes the way in which his brother becomes quiet in lines 38–40. Once again, he refers to '**my brother**': the return of the first person possessive pronoun is almost like a return to the equilibrium.

The fricative sound of the '**face**', '**fall**', and '**father**' is used to emphasise the sounds made by the quietening baby. The enjambment between lines 39 and 40 furthermore denote the gentle falling of his brother's head onto his father's chest.

Lines 41.

Following the silencing of his brother's cries, the speaker continues reading – fortifying his young mind with knowledge. The phrase '**died away**' refers to the quietening baby. However, the phrase's presence at the opening of stanza eleven, and when considered in isolation, adopts a darker meaning: many soldiers died away from their homes during World War One.

Lines 42–43.

The use of the caesura full stop in line 42 separates the speaker's two actions once the baby has quietened: he begins to read and almost immediately after beginning to read on, his head is raised by the sound of his father singing. We know from earlier in the poem that the speaker was familiar with his father's singing which suggests that there was something significant, or unfamiliar, about this particular song that made him look up. The suddenness is further conveyed by the absent determiner '**that**' between '**singing brought**' – perhaps the father's fragmented mind is being reflected in a breakdown of language within the poem.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 44–48.

We learn that he is no longer singing his **'wordless lullabies'** that that the father is merely vocalising to get the child back to sleep. One of the hallmarks of traditional lullabies is the rhyming which often creates a harmonious sound. Interestingly, the mood of the poem is further enhanced by the absence of rhyme which creates an additional connection to the emotional state of the father. The term **'wordless'** is also significant here because it holds connotations of not speaking, or not communicating. These were identified as key problems for World War One soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder (or PTSD).⁷ Although, it is worth noting that by the end of the poem the father is communicating beyond speech via song.

By this point we are still not aware of why or what his father sings but the speaker has one aspect of certainty and that is that this singing **'was never meant for any infant's comfort'** and the comforting lullaby is **'gone'**. Here, we see the perceptiveness of the child in determining that the father's singing was inappropriate for a young child.

Lines 49–50.

By stanza thirteen the previously non-descript kitchen has become **'bleak'** reflecting the mood of the father. The child's cries have triggered the disturbed memories of war. These memories would include the pain, suffering and death, seen and experienced by soldiers. The crying has taken him to a place in his mind that has suddenly rendered the kitchen **'bleak'**; here, we see the invasion of wartime experience upon the domestic space. The word **'bleak'** is often likened to a barren landscape, echoing the wartime battlefield; the kitchen has now become a place where he is reliving these memories of war.

The description of his father in these lines has gone from a gentler and quieter figure to **'the stern, young man'** – use of the determiner **'the'** augments a greater separation between himself and his father. Furthermore, the mention that (with two children) the father is still **'young'** is another disturbing reminder of just how young soldiers were who served during the war. It is also a clue to the way the poem keeps two perspectives in play, i.e. the child and the adult speaker. The noun **'man'** is quite universal and /or impersonal, meaning that Norris may be attempting to convey how these experiences of war, and more specifically, cases of PTSD, were more common and widespread amongst soldiers.

(7) Benjamin Russell Butterworth, 'What World War I taught us about PTSD', *The Conversation*, (2018)

theconversation.com/what-world-war-i-taught-us-about-ptsd-105613

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 51–53.

Up to this point, the father's voice has been described as **'quiet'** but here he raises his voice. The speaker uses a declarative tone when he describes the raising of his father's voice **'in pain and anger'**. This conveys the certainty and awareness felt by the speaker that there is more depth to why his father sings. Representing the father's state of mind, the words **'pain and anger'** do not offer readers any insight into the cause of pain, and, indeed, offer a generalised or naïve view into what might be causing the father pain.

The final stanza opens with **'sang'** which is immediately followed by a full stop. In a way, Norris's use of grammar is reflecting the isolation felt by the father.

Lines 54–56.

The speaker's unfamiliarity with his father's song at this point opens a range of interpretations. That the content or tune is unfamiliar, that the father is opening the door to hitherto unarticulated recollections of feelings, even that the **'song'** is a euphemism for tears (echoing the wail of the baby earlier). The tone of uncertainty that was established at the beginning of the poem has returned, just like the father's recurring memories of war.

Norris uses the fronted conjunction **'But'** to establish the father's outward manifestation of his internal suffering. The fear felt by the speaker at that point suggests a paralysis in the moment of epiphany. The **'fright'** once again reminds the reader of childhood innocence upon viewing his father in this way. Despite this, the moment he sees his father's anguish is pivotal in the development of their relationship as it enhances the speaker's understanding of his father. It is also pertinent for the development of the boy, as he is the witness to something unexplained, but his response is a mature wish to dignify, solemnify and acknowledge the occasion.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

At first glance the poem appears to suggest that a focal point might be the relationship between father and son. However, it soon becomes apparent that concepts of time, memory, and tradition are important in revealing the long-lasting effects of war.

'His Father, Singing' can also be viewed as a poem about the differences between the perceptions of an adult, who has experienced life, and a child, who primarily gains his understanding of the world through books. Despite the lack of understanding and ignorance voiced by the child (although now written from an adult's perspective as the poem is in the past tense), one aspect that does unite the two is a profound connection and reorganisation while being incomprehensible.

The significance of place is evident throughout the poem as a way of exploring tension between the comfort and intimate domestic space ('**garden, small bedroom, kitchen**') and the cold and callous space of the front. This enables Norris to depict the horrors of war through the trauma suggestively experienced by the father. The reference to France ('**French mud**') creates a physical distance but it is not enough for the father to escape the horrors of war. Towards the end of the poem, his mind is firmly under the control of his memories which are conveyed to readers and the speaker through his singing. Jarvis observantly mentions that Norris is 'a writer who is both in and out of place'[1] and this is certainly true of 'His Father, Singing', and I would add that in this poem, Norris is also in and out of time through a symbolic use of tradition which include language, industry, passing handmade blankets down generations, and the iconic Welsh nursing shawl.

The difficulties of communication and understanding the emotions of others seems to be a dominant motif in the poem. This is conveyed through the singing, crying, learned language from parents, and even the reference to a pigeon which has connotations of communication, specifically due to their usage during World War One. This motif creates a sense of irony as the father is unable to communicate his internal suffering. However, the manifestation of this suffering seems to be triggered by the child's physical suffering. In some ways, the father and child communicate unknowingly through their shared pain.

These types of suffering notably contrast. Furthermore, the physical pain of the child which is caused by teething – a natural process of infancy – is juxtaposed with the emotional pain of the father, caused by war – a man-made societal conflict. This natural and manmade juxtaposition is another feature of dislocation within the poem that seeks to convey the father's fragmented mindset.

(8) Matthew Jarvis, 'Leslie Norris, In and Out of Place', *Poetry Wales*, 42/2 (2006), 35–39.

FIVE QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

- How many possessive pronouns are there in the poem? What is their significance?
- How does Norris create a sense of connection or dislocation within the poem?
- The structure of the poem is fourteen regular stanzas of four lines (quatrains), with irregular use of end-stopped and enjambed lines. There is also frequent and irregular use of the caesura. With this in mind, how important is the structure of the poem?
- What is an epiphany? Can you identify an epiphany within the poem and how does the poet achieve this? What is more significant in this poem – the moment of epiphany experienced by the speaker, or mental anguish of the father?
- Is this a war poem?

PHOTOGRAPHS



A photograph of Leslie Norris:
peoplescollection.wales/items/36368

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SECTION 6

(links active June 2021)
All links are clickable

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Literary Worlds: An Exhibit of Leslie Norris's Life and Work exhibits.lib.byu.edu/literaryworlds/norris.html

The Royal Society of Literature: Leslie Norris rsliterature.org/fellow/leslie-norris

Mapping Literary Utah: Leslie Norris mappingliteraryutah.org/utah-writers/leslie-norris

'An Astonishing Life' - Poet Leslie Norris deseret.com/2004/4/18/19823737/an-astonishing-life-151-poet-leslie-norris
[#leslie-norris-a-renown-poet-is-seen-here-when-he-was-6-with-his-younger-brother-eric-age-2](https://twitter.com/leslie_norris)

Neil Aitken, Canadian poet and former undergraduate student of Leslie Norris, reads 'His Father, Singing'
[youtube.com/watch?v=9baBfaPOa-k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9baBfaPOa-k)

Glyn Mathias on the working relationship between his father, Roland Mathias, and Leslie Norris
literaturewales.org/lw-blog/looking-back-the-genesis-of-the-roland-mathias-prize-for-poetry

Leslie Norris: Obituary [independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/leslie-norris-6104085.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/leslie-norris-6104085.html)

The Welsh Nursing Shawl: welshhat.wordpress.com/elements-of-welsh-costumes/shawl-siol/nursing-shawl-siol-magu

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Prifysgol Abertawe



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Dannie Abse

'Return to Cardiff'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Welsh-Jewish writer Dannie Abse (1923–2014) was a poet, novelist, playwright and a doctor. He once stated, ‘I like to think I’m a poet and Medicine my serious hobby’. His career as a physician and his wartime experiences substantially impacted the style, mood and subjects explored in his poetry. Though based in London for much of his career, his creative work offered an alternative perspective on place, which in turn invigorated discussions on identity in Wales for a new generation of poets.

Dannie Abse spent his early life in Cardiff before moving to London to pursue his studies in medicine. He was one of four siblings in a Welsh-Jewish family. Critically, his older brothers – Leo, a campaigning Labour MP and Wilfred, a respected psychiatrist – influenced his future creative work as a young boy. The presence of his brothers meant there were frequent discussions on Marx and Freud in the household. His parents were Rudolph and Kate Abse, a multilingual and musical couple who provided Abse with simulating conversation throughout his adolescence. His influences included Dylan Thomas who had ‘an influence on me, negatively, I wanted to avoid being too much like him’ as Abse has said in an interview¹ Abse’s early work was also influenced by Rainer Maria Rilke as evidenced by *The Poetry Foundation*.²

Dannie was one of the few children of Jewish descent to attend St Illtyd’s grammar school in Cardiff which was formally a Christian establishment. He then continued his education at the university of South Wales and Monmouthshire (now Cardiff University). He concluded his education at King’s College London before spending time at Westminster hospital. Similarly, Wilfred attended King’s College London and Westminster hospital which demonstrates the way in which his childhood influenced him as an adult. He began to work as a doctor in the 1950s before narrowing his ambitions to specialise as a chest doctor (1954–1989) at the Central Medical Establishment. Contemporary poetry and religion began to inspire his creative work through the poetry of T.S Eliot, in addition to the Bible. Indeed, Abse and Eliot exchanged correspondences with Eliot encouraging the young poet to pursue his creative aspirations.

(1) Phil Morris, ‘Dannie Abse | In Conversation’, *Wales Arts Review*, 2013
walesartsreview.org/in-conversation-with-dannie-abse

(2) *Poetry Foundation*, ‘Dannie Abse’, *Poetry Foundation*, 2021
poetryfoundation.org/poets/dannie-abse

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

There were two defining moments in the life of Dannie Abse which influenced his writing: his time in national service and the tragic circumstances surrounding the death of his wife. The first event occurred in 1951 when he was called up for national service during the Korean War (1950–1953). It should be noted that between 1947–63 all able-bodied men were called up for a standardised form of peacetime conscription. He stayed on as a medical officer until he progressed to Middlesex Hospital where he remained until the end of his career as a medical professional.

The second event was the death of his wife Joan Abse (nee Mercer) who died in 2005 following a car crash near their second home in Ogmere-by-Sea. Her death was a catalyst for his later poetry that concentrated on grief and mortality, while the loss of Joan was felt more widely by the creative community. She was a respected art historian and together they edited two books, *Voices in the Gallery: Poems and Pictures* (1986) and *The Music Lover's Literary Companion* (1988). Her abrupt death impacted his ability to write until 2007 when he published *The Presence*, a collection which explores the struggle of loss as well as human devotion.

His poetry collections include *The Presence* (2007), *White Coat, Purple Coat* (1989), *Selected Poems* (1970), *Pythagoras* (1979), *Way Out in the Centre* (1981) and *Running Late* (2006), for which he was awarded the Roland Mathias prize. Abse was an accomplished prose writer, and he drew on his own childhood experiences of Cardiff in *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve* (1954) and *There Was a Young Man from Cardiff* (1991).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'Return to Cardiff' evokes images of a journey and a return to a city which holds sharp memories for the speaker of the poem. Yet, the word 'Return' also implies a period of looking back and revisiting the past. In this way, the physical return to Cardiff by the poet immediately draws on his memories from childhood. The lack of the definite or indefinite article ('the' return or 'a' return) allows this return to stand for more than a single, specific visit: there is the possibility of multiple returns in the imagination. The internal to-ing and fro-ing between place of origin (and the past) and one's place in the present which is invoked in the poem's meditation on identity and memory. Some readers would be aware that Abse grew up in Cardiff and left the city to pursue his career in England early in his adult life. Even without this knowledge it is clear the speaker's ideas on identity – which are explored throughout the poem – are stained by nostalgia, and a sense displacement felt by the speaker on returning in fact or imagination to this former home-city.

Form.

The poem has seven stanzas. The number of lines vary in each section but this format is likely because of the restrictions the typesetter encountered while laying the poem out on the page for the anthology. The true form of the poem would have four lines in each stanza. The poem in the anthology appears more fragmented than the poet intended. The longer lines could imitate the thoughts of the speaker as he returns to Cardiff, in the same way nostalgia unexpectedly strikes and pulls us on a journey into our past. Each line indicates the way the speaker is seeing his hometown, with new and old eyes. However, the third and fourth line of each stanza interrupts the flow of the poem by punctuating each section with a one-or-two-word line. Each stanza follows a particular rhyme pattern with the first and last line of each section sharing an end-rhyme. Certain words are repeated throughout the poem to emphasis the way in which the poet feels an initial attachment to the city and his subsequent displacement such as 'my first', 'unable' and 'I'. The fragmented language and grammar of the poem, chiefly in the opening stanza, can be viewed in two ways: to make sense of lingering memory as well as an attempt by the poet to immerse himself in the defining moments and imagery of his childhood.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The language used in the poem contributes to the establishment of a sorrowful tone and bleak atmosphere which is shown early in the narrative. Dai George writes in *“Return To Cardiff”: Dannie Abse Tribute*:

Though no one could miss the melancholy that clouds this homecoming, it would be easy to underestimate the unusual, fractured quality of the poem’s prosody. It appears to offer us a moving experience – one that any prodigal son might understand – but in fact does everything within its power, formally, to frustrate emotional purchase. Through hesitancy and interruption, the poem enacts a type of failed nostalgia. It is a numb poem, a mistimed poem, and a poem that almost disintegrates into ugly, fragmented non-poetry. As such, it is a poem better equipped than any other I can think of to convey the listless non-emotion of self-imposed exile.³

Each section offers a further glimpse into the childhood memories of the poet growing up in Cardiff which is contrasted by the modern city that he meets when he arrives at his hometown. In this way, readers are walking alongside the poet as he explores the city. They stand beside him throughout his shock and resentment at discovering how much the city has changed since he left home.

Lines 1-4.

The title establishes the speaker is on a journey to his hometown of Cardiff while the opening line is reminiscent of someone arriving at their destination. Despite this **“Hometown;”** with its semi-colon and inverted commas is at once distinguished from the preceding words that follow it. The word exists in isolation from the main body of the poem and this is accentuated by the stilted use of grammar throughout the stanza which prevents readers from settling into a natural rhythm. The form of the poem seems to remind readers of the way in which the poet feels out-of-step in his hometown.

The apathetic tone of the second part of the line: **‘well, most admit an affection for a city’** could excuse his sense of attachment to the city which he finds difficult to understand and consolidate with his childhood memories of the place. Thus, **‘affection’** is a docile verb which indicates slight enthusiasm and excitement, yet the language reveals the city as a mystifying place, only accessible to those who can understand it, such as Abse as a teenager and the streets he cycled on to school. While the speaker as a child would have found the streets familiar, and the overall tone of these lines are affectionate, the sense of displacement felt by the speaker as an adult can be read as disturbing, especially when all his memories are drawn from past failures, such as **‘botched love affair’**.

(3) Dai George, Wales Arts Review, *‘RETURN TO CARDIFF’: DANNIE ABSE TRIBUTE*, 2014
walesartsreview.org/a-tribute-to-dannie-abse-a-look-at-return-to-cardiff

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The second line abruptly submerges readers in nostalgia, or at least childhood memory. The **'affection'** is through the familiarity with which the poet connects his memories as a teenager to the **'grey, tangled streets'** and the further **'first everything'** which has informed his personality as an adult. This nostalgia is deliberate and distances the poet from the landscape as well as draws attention to the strangeness of the word **"Hometown"** where an intimate connection is tied to the people, landscape and memory. This has positive and negative associations, so the strangeness of the community is remembered in a way that passing tourists would not understand. For example, a street name would just be a landmark for a passing tourist, a place to visit and browse, while connections with **'Hometown'** would transform that street into **'my first cigarette'**. This is made stranger still through Abse as a Welsh-Jewish writer who grew up in a multiracial, yet still racially discriminatory, community. This is evidenced in other work but chiefly his *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve* (Abse, 1982), which provides readers an insight into his childhood in Cardiff.³

The term **'a city'** both claims and dismisses the city - by using the indefinite article it could be any city, any boyhood - yet it's interesting that **'a city'** seems to diminish his bonds rather than universalising an affection. The rhyming words **'city'** and **'pity'** and the dark language of **'grey, tangled streets'**, **'fool'** and **'botched love affair'** reveal a childhood which was less than idyllic, however, this familiarity, and any affection tied to it, is firmly situated in the past. So, **'a city'** could be any city but the speaker continues and reaffirms his connection to Cardiff by switching to a definitive article in **'the back lane'** but all these experiences are **'botched'** in some way.

Nonetheless, the way in which the second line submerges readers in nostalgia offers a monochromatic portrayal of a city which builds on the destructive language - **'fool'** and **'faded torments'** - used throughout the stanza. A cigarette is an item with an intense smell and its smoke blackens whatever it touches which is preceded by **'grey'**. The monochromatic picture is fulfilled by **'botched love affair'** which could, however loosely, be seen as a burnt heart. These two lines, connected by enjambment, seem to tie the two acts of smoking and heartbreak together in one picture punctuated by commas, almost imitating the inhaled of a first-time smoker, breathing in deeply only to cough and stutter before attempting another puff (**'[inhale]my first cigarette / in the back lane, [cough] and fool [cough], [inhale]my first botched love affair'**). The final lines of the stanza use language like **'Faded'** which, after time, cigarette smoke eventually does to the room/landscape it has been frequently smoked in, suggesting that the speaker's memories have been visited more than once in **'self-indulgent pity'** outside of the city where recollections are **'faded'** by distance, as well as time. But his visit stirs up these memories, and Abse's use of short sentences: **'First everything.'** reveal the intensity in which they appear to the speaker. Despite this all attempts to concentrate on the positive aspects of his childhood are overshadowed in favour of the more violent and disturbing memories of youth, such as **'botched love affair'** and **'Faded torments'**.

(3) Dannie Abse, *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1983).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

It is important to note that the form of the poem changes in line three and focuses readers attention on the word '**cigarette**'. As mentioned, smoking is an activity which engages all the senses, from touch, taste to smell. In addition to this the item draws on the memories of the poet that he connected with his hometown. In doing so, line three becomes a moment in which the poet and his readers can pause and reflect on the past as well as on contemporary Cardiff.

Lines 5-9⁴.

Line five discusses the theme of cultural displacement in '**The journey to Cardiff seemed less a return than a raid**'. However, the use of '**seemed**' displaces any opportunity for a strong emotional reaction by the poet. This dispirited attitude is continued in the following lines which describe present-day Cardiff. These observations share many similarities with the abrupt remarks of a doctor's notebook where the main verb is conspicuously absent: '**the whole locus [is] smaller**' and '**Taff [is] now a stream**'. In addition to this, '**raid**' conjures images of a violent incursion with the aim of stealing or killing, recalling, perhaps, the war (Abse lived through air raids in Cardiff, and lost his best friend in one), or his brief dash home to capture some sense of self. His return home has become a '**gothic dream**' which recalls the monochromatic language in the first stanza. The word '**gothic**' has a loose connection to the films of Abse's childhood, thinking specifically of Hammer Horror which Abse would have grown up with, with its shadowed cinematography and threatening landscapes, yet, Cardiff's landscape is familiar to Abse but is now '**smaller**' and a '**joker's façade**'.

The poet repeatedly restrains himself from investing in the present city and instead offers recollections on his childhood which are tarnished by a voice of maturity where the city is smaller, and the '**mile-wide Taff**' is now a '**stream**' and the castle is not a '**black gothic dream**' but a '**decent sprawl**'. Moreover, '**mislaid identities**' link to the final images of the poem where the child that had once found Cardiff so enthralling no longer exists except in memory.

(4) Line numbers refer to the lines as printed here (including run-on lines).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The word **'locus'**, as defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, used in line six means 'a particular position or place where something occurs or is situated'.⁵ However, there is also a mathematical definition of the word which is a termination at which other points branch away and diverge to maintain an equal distance from its origins, as defined by the same dictionary, drawing on Abse's medical education which would have a foundation in mathematics. Cardiff appears smaller to the poet now that he is viewing the city as an adult, although the shrinkage is exaggerated: **'the mile-wide Taff'** becomes **'a stream'** and the once black castle of nightmares is a **'decent sprawl'** with a **'toy façade'** (alluding to the adult's knowledge that Cardiff Castle is a Victorian reconstruction built by the neo-medievalist Lord Bute). This language is condescending, indifferent, and lacklustre at best, especially considering it is his hometown that the poet is portraying with these images. Although, it should be noted rivers are natural markers which are in constant motion, both connecting Cardiff to a wider Wales as well as international waters. While Abse dwells on the castle more than the river in this stanza, water breaks were used as protection against invading forces in medieval times. In present-day Cardiff the river is now **'a stream'** so the word **'raid'** becomes even more threatening when faced with the possibility that defences are essentially down. Perhaps Abse is seeing his own identity as the castle and present-day Cardiff as an invading force which is difficult, if not impossible, to keep back.

The break in line 9 with **'some / black'** continues the disparate and disenchanting tone of the piece which is emphasised by **'a joker's toy façade'**, further connecting this stanza with stanza one and the monochromatic language established by the speaker's **'first cigarette'**.

Lines 10-13.

The third stanza opens with the word **'Unfocused'** that establishes the state of mind of the poet. Furthermore, the poet is disoriented by his inability to reaffirm his place in his hometown. In this way, the language used throughout this stanza develops the image of a desperate man grasping, often abstract, images to establish an uncertain connection with the landscape.

The list of imprecise fragments: **'Odds and ends'**, **'fringes'** and **'glimpses'** along with **'quit'** suggest the anxious way in which the poet is struggling to remember his Cardiff and the identity attached to those memories. **'White'** stands as a blank reminder that both he and the place have changed, and the poet acknowledges he must adapt to his changed surroundings if he wants to find a foothold in his hometown, his memories and future identity which is evidenced in **'suddenly aghast with certain news'**. This is continued in the following stanza where the speaker is **'unable to define anything I can hardly speak'** indicating a physical and emotional muteness at this revelation.

(5) Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 'locus', *Merriam-Webster*, n.d [merriam-webster.com/dictionary/locus](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/locus)

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Yet, his memories are **'unfocused'** and as the stanza reaches its apex these memories subsequently become more challenging to recollect and therefore assume a sinister tone of half-understood, intuited knowledge. Again the sense of perspective of the boy clashes with that of the adult, but at the end of this stanza the boy's view prevails. The face of his grandfather remains **'the white, enormous'**. At the end of this third stanza, the poem has moved through a full cycle of life, from a child playing in the streets, through a first love affair, conquering gothic fears, through allusions to war (raid) and the poet's profession (doctor) to the foreshadowing of death, here via the mortality of grandparents: **'suddenly aghast with certain news'**.

Lines 14–17.

The fourth stanza expresses a love for place which is stymied by the poet's inability to **'define'** his feelings (or memories?). This failure of language leads to silence **'I can hardly speak'** or rather the faltering and sprawling form of the poem. The central tension and paradox of the poem is expressed in this stanza: **'I still love the place for what I wanted it to be / as much as for what is unashamedly is'**. These two lines, which are tied together with enjambment, offer readers a poignant moment of self-awareness and recognition: the city as it **'unashamedly is'** is loved by the speaker. Loving **'the place for what I wanted it to be'** is ambiguous. Does the speaker refer to what he wanted the city to be on his return? Or is he recalling past aspirations for his hometown? In both the imagined place and the **'unashamed'** reality, there is perhaps an echo of the speaker himself – the man/boy he wanted to be/become and the person he knows he is. Moreover, the inclusion of the word **'is'** reinforces the acknowledgment of the ways in which the speaker is unhomed in present-day Cardiff, forever detached from his childhood self in this city **'of strangers, alien and bleak'**.

Lines 18–22.

The stanza opens on the poet confessing that he is **'Unable to communicate'** (an echo of the previous stanza which begins with **'Unable to define'**). He feels **'easily betrayed'** and **'uneasily diverted'** because his memories are no longer vigorous enough to sustain a sense of belonging to Cardiff, or because his memories are too multiple yet diffuse to be recalled with clarity when faced with present-day Cardiff. The frustration which is build up throughout the poem begins to unravel here only to explode in the following stanza through the onslaught of disturbing childhood memories. This approaching outburst is foreshadowed by the line **'as light slants down a different shade'** which suggests that the poet is looking at the landscape through a changed perspective.

Furthermore, **'mere sense reflections'** share a connection with language used in the third stanza where **'Unfocused voices'**, **'fringes caught'** and **'odds and ends'** where the poet was **'diverted'** more easily before the stanza culminates with the stark image of his grandfather, internalised here by the idea that those are just **'reflections'** and his attention is now fixed on his feelings of betrayal. His memories are **'anchored'** by **'waterscapes that wander, alter'** suggesting a shift in attitude towards his attachment to Cardiff, reaffirming the speaker as being in **'a city of strangers'**.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Indeed, the poet is now searching for a tangible connection to the landscape which is not exclusively tied to memory. In this way, water becomes a means of refuge as well as mayhem. The **'waterscapes that wander', 'anchored', and 'the Taff'** demonstrate the way in which the speaker is changing his attitude to the city. Yet, to be anchored by the Taff presents certain complications where the environmental, ecological and human intervention both alter that immediate landscape. For this reason, the word **'anchored'** does not instil the coveted sense of stability which the poet has been yearning for throughout this poem and the river acts a medium in which the poet can pause and reflect on his memories and the subsequent emotions they invoke which dominate the final stanzas of the poem. The following images of the **'noise of trams, gunshots'** are stopped by a reference to the past where **'what they once called Tiger / Bay'** is a way of distancing his sense of attachment to the city he finds difficult to understand in the present-day.

Lines 23–28.

The impressions formed all the way through this stanza offer a contradiction where **'illusory'** is in contention with the word **'real'**. For instance, **'that lost dark playground after rain'** takes on an ominous quality where the poet is **'lost'** in his memories in addition to the city. Yet, the poet repeatedly attempts to return to the present-day by **'anchoring'** himself alongside the river Taff.

It should be noted that **'only real this smell of ripe, damp earth'** which further emphasises the way in which the poet acquires reassurance by positioning himself firmly in the natural world (or at least one of the parks which border the river). The poet's reaffirmation follows two lines which expose a series of fragmented disturbing adolescent memories which are offered to readers through the clatter of violence. These fragmented images reveal the way in which adolescence is tarnished by an increased awareness of an unjust and tumultuous society. **'The noise of trams, gunshots'** empowers the poem with a different sensory characteristic where scent and the aural subdue narrative sense. This violence happens offstage, perhaps only conveyed via hearsay. The place **'they'** once called **'Tiger Bay'** (the area around the ports of Cardiff which was and is home to one of the oldest black communities in the UK) is perhaps stereotypically associated with rumours of violence. The community and district itself remains unrealised, a place once named Tiger Bay, whose new name (Bute Town or later Cardiff Bay), is not noted.

The inclusion of the sun provides the scents of deterioration a **'half exquisite and half plain'** quality, as if airing out an attic or photobook. In this way, the poet is now exploring his past through a learned understanding which is created by a new-found recognition of the city.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 29–32.

The final stanza recognises the **'other Cardiff had gone'**. The evocative metaphor which reduces the present-day Cardiff to **'tinned resemblances'** of his more vividly remembered (and therefore fresher) city. **'Tinned resemblances'** refers to tinned food – a commodity of great importance particularly after the Second World War, symbolising modernity, mass production, convenience and – the sense conveyed here by Abse – something lacking in authenticity, immediacy and taste or nuance. In this way, the opening lines share a similarity with the phrase *smoke and mirrors*, or **'façade'**, a word which draws readers back to one of the central themes of the poem (cultural displacement). Yet, it is no accident that the rhyme scheme for this stanza employs the words **'gone'** and **'on'** to indicate that the poet feels his identity has been impacted following his return to the city. Yet, **'on'** implies that he will move on after his journey to Cardiff has reached a conclusion. Dai George identifies a 'psychological disintegration'⁶ in the poem and this is demonstrated in the final two lines of the poem where the language takes on a spectral quality as **'The boy I was not and man I am not / met'** converge for a second before walking forward into an ever-changing future. This meeting exposes questions on how time is represented throughout the poem, especially in the face of memories and places which are already gone. It should not be possible for the two figures to meet in this manner and yet in the overlapping memories sparked by places known in the past and visited in the present, the ghosts of Abse's selves meet. Yet even this meeting is denied in the very moment it is evoked: for the meeting takes place between **'the boy I was not'** and **'the man I am not'** further problematizing the nature of memory and identity. Yet in the mirroring of the language (**'was not' / 'am not'**), the two imagined figures, or doppelgangers, are brought into transitory contact in the emplaced memory of the speaker.

(6) Dai George, Wales Arts Review, *'RETURN TO CARDIFF': DANNIE ABSE TRIBUTE*, 2014
walesartsreview.org/a-tribute-to-dannie-abse-a-look-at-return-to-cardiff

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The poem explores themes on cultural identity and displacement that are tied to a landscape. Yet, the poem also suggests the way in which memory can deteriorate and change over time. In this way, the speaker shares an exaggerated perspective of youth where places, which once appeared larger and grander to him as a child, now seem to be condensed and percolated through an adult perspective. The gothic imagery that pervades the poem furthers this sense of a childhood which is unhomely and distanced by memory and time where the castle changes from its **'gothic façade'** to a **'decent sprawl'**, and the image of giants is diminished. The spectral figure of the grandfather shares an association with the image of giants, where it is his death, or breakdown (**'white, enormous face'**) which the speaker remembers rather than any happy memories of their time together. The poem moves through a full cycle of life, from a child playing in the streets, through to the foreshadowing of death, here via the mortality of grandparents: **'suddenly aghast with certain news'**.

The poem can be read as an extended analysis on identity which is explored by the poet asking the question: who am I? Dannie Abse hopes to answer this question by returning to Cardiff to reaffirm his identity. However, the natural map of Cardiff has irrevocably changed where his childhood area of Cardiff is firmly situated in the past by the words, **'once called'** in line 24, leaving him unable to entirely reconcile his identity, or return to the Cardiff of his past through the words, **'smoke in the memory... tinned resemblances'**. So, he must literally move on from the place, as well as emotionally.

The form of the poem accentuates the feelings of frustration which this question provokes in the poet. Dai George argues: 'Abse communicates such psychological disintegration through a stark, frustrated music. The rebarbative diction – full of confusing elisions, dangling lists and clauses in disagreement – conveys the feeling of homelessness with greater power than any polished eloquence ever could.'⁷

The poem demonstrates the way in which the poet is overwhelmed by the changes which adversely impact his perspective on – and feelings of attachment to – his hometown. For this reason, present-day Cardiff takes on a strange and unfamiliar characteristic that only aggravates feelings of displacement and cultural exile experienced by the poet. This characteristic is demonstrated by the lines **'Faded torments; self-indulgent pity'** and **'a city of strangers, alien and bleak'** where the city only alienates the poet and leaves him unable to merge all aspects of his identity.

(7) Dai George, Wales Arts Review, *'RETURN TO CARDIFF': DANNIE ABSE TRIBUTE*, 2014
walesartsreview.org/a-tribute-to-dannie-abse-a-look-at-return-to-cardiff

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The final two lines of the poem are perhaps its most striking. Moreover, these two lines attempt to provide a resolution to the troubling experiences which the poet has confronted throughout the duration of his journey. This is so he can leave his hometown and re-determine a future identification which is not exclusively reliant on Cardiff. Thus, the meeting between **'the boy I was and the man I am not'** shows Abse distinguishing between his childhood and adult persona. This connection is emphasised by the repetition of **'I'** where the man and boy both walk on, although the line is ambiguous and offers no resolutions to the speaker's sense of frustration which has dominated the poem.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

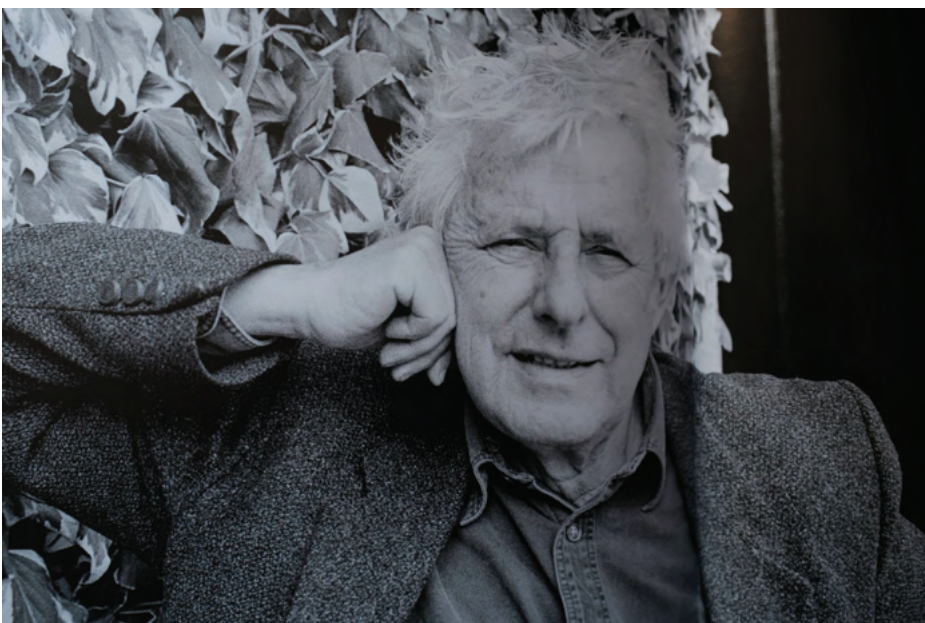
- In what way is memory evoked when exploring tensions between childhood and adulthood?
- In what way does the repetition of specific words or images contribute to a sense of emotional distance in the poem?
- What possible meanings can be drawn from the concluding two lines of the poem?
- How does the speaker perceive his identity following his return to Cardiff?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5

(links active August 2021)

All links are clickable



Photograph courtesy of Bernard Mitchell.

Bernard Mitchell was born in Morriston, Swansea and has worked in newspapers for thirty years as a photographer. Bernard Mitchell is responsible for incorporating and developing the Welsh Arts Archive and holds the copyright to all the images within it.

bernardmitchell.co.uk/biography

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

You can find more information about Dannie Abse, including a reading of 'Return to Cardiff' by the poet: Wales Arts Review on 'RETURN TO CARDIFF':
DANNIE ABSE TRIBUTE, 2014

walesartsreview.org/a-tribute-to-dannie-abse-a-look-at-return-to-cardiff

SECTION 7

FURTHER READING

Dannie Abse, *Welsh Retrospective*, Archard, Cary (ed) (Bridgend: Seren Books, 2009).

Dannie Abse, *There was a Young Man from Cardiff* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 2001).

Dannie Abse, *Intermittent Journals* (Bridgend: Seren, 1994).

Bernard Mitchell, *Pieces of a Jigsaw: Portraits of Artists and Writers of Wales* (Swansea: Parthian Books, 2017).



Dr R. S. Phillips

*CREW, Swansea University
August, 2021*



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Dannie Abse

'Not Adlestrop'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Dannie Abse was born in Cardiff in 1923 and was brought up in the city. He moved to London in 1943 to study Medicine at King’s College and went on to qualify as a doctor in 1950. In spite of living in London, Abse maintained a strong connection to the area in which he grew up, and owned a second home in the town of Ogmores-by-Sea which he visited when possible. His writing often explores ideas relating to identity and the concept of returning home, with poems such as ‘The Game’ and ‘Return to Cardiff’ depicting the city of his youth. Abse was a secular Jew and was particularly conscious of this identity, which often surfaced in the reflections in his later work. His work as a doctor and the many different facets of his identity contribute to the complexity of his poetry, which often weaves his love of life and sense of nostalgia for his childhood together with influences from the variety of other writers and poets who inspired him.

As well as publishing over sixteen collections of poetry, Abse was also the author of an autobiographical prose work, *Ash on a Young Man’s Sleeve* (1954) and was the editor of the seminal anthology *Twentieth Century Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (1997). His work, both poetry and prose, is often characterised by a balance of gentle humour and fascination with the significance of everyday moments.

(A brief biography is available in the *Library of Wales anthology Poetry 1900–2000*, ed. Meic Stephens, pp. 304–5.)

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The title of the poem, **'Not Adlestrop'**, draws on a well-known poem by another Welsh poet, Edward Thomas. Thomas's poem, published in 1917, was entitled 'Adlestrop' and describes a train journey he took in 1914. The journey itself was unremarkable, but Thomas uses the poem to depict a moment of peace as the train makes an unscheduled stop at Adlestrop station in Gloucestershire where he sits quietly and listens to the birds singing and enjoys being in the moment. The title of Abse's poem therefore refers directly to Thomas's poem. Joseph Cohen has described Abse's poem as 'a sort of curious conversation' with Thomas's poem because of the way it responds to, and differs from, Thomas's work (1).

Form.

The first line of the second and fourth stanzas is indented, a subtle adjustment which has two main effects. Visually, the indentation draws the reader's eye and pulls their attention towards these sections of the poem. Thematically, the indentation keeps the poem moving forward, reminding the reader that time is passing and the train is moving. Like the train, the poem is moving on and the indented lines draw us back into the middle of the scene at the station, allowing the events to unfold seamlessly across all four stanzas. The form of 'Not Adlestrop' differs slightly from that of Edward Thomas's 'Adlestrop', which is made up of four stanzas each of four lines in length. Thomas's poem has a very balanced feel that is in contrast to the changeable format of Abse's poem. While 'Adlestrop' has a perfectly-balanced structure which matches its presentation of a moment of unspoilt peace and tranquillity, the structure of 'Not Adlestrop' is more haphazard, with stanzas of unequal length reflecting the excitement and intensity of the fleeting encounter the poem depicts.

Lines 1 - 6.

The poem opens with a negative, the assertion that this is not Adlestrop (line 1), a claim which simultaneously links this poem to Edward Thomas's 'Adlestrop' and seeks to distance itself from the idyllic rural image presented by Thomas's poem. This opening sets the tone for the rest of the poem, which often places emphasis on what is not happening and on what is not being said. The poet builds on this approach by setting a scene in which things are not quite as they should be; the speaker has arrived **'too early'** (line 3) and finds himself on a deserted platform, and the train which arrives at the station is **'the wrong train'** (line 4).

(1) Joseph Cohen, *The Poetry of Dannie Abse: Critical Essays and Reminiscences* (London: Robson Books, 1983), p. 40.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1 - 6 (continued).

The fact that this train is described as being 'surprised' (line 4) indicates that something unexpected is happening and foreshadows the speaker's own surprise at the way he is instinctively drawn towards the girl he sees looking out through the train window as the poem unfolds.

This first stanza is crucial to establishing the balance of power between the speaker and the girl on the train. The speaker is positioned on the platform, with the train window acting as a barrier between him and the girl who has caught his attention. The repetition of the word '**very**' (line 6) emphasises, somewhat childishly, the way in which the speaker is immediately attracted to the girl and is not afraid to admit to this attraction. This openness from the speaker continues in the stanzas that follow, as he goes on to describe how strongly he is drawn to this stranger.

Lines 7 - 11.

This stanza is comprised of a single sentence, which seems to lend the poem a breathless nature, perhaps reflecting the speaker's excitement at this unexpected encounter and the speed at which the meeting occurs. The speaker describes himself as being '**all instinct**' (line 7), effectively absolving himself of responsibility for his actions by reducing them to an instinctive response to the beauty of the girl he sees through the train window. The revelation that the speaker is married adds another layer to the encounter, lending his open admiration of this stranger an illicit tone.

Non-verbal communication is crucial in these lines as the speaker describes the way he '**stared**' (line 8) at the girl, while the slightest of movements from her as she '**inclined her head away**' (line 8) becomes a point of focus for the speaker. However fleeting this meeting may be, it appears that both parties are aware of its significance. The way the girl attempts to turn away from the speaker suggests that she is aware of his gaze and is uncomfortable with it, perhaps sensing the speaker's apparent intensity. There is a sense of ambiguity here; the speaker interprets the girl's response as a reaction to the realisation that he is married, but gives no indication of why he believes the girl may have been able to recognise his status as a married man from her position on the train. Like the speaker, the girl's reaction is '**all instinct**' (line 8), a shared response which links the two together even at this early stage of the poem. The gaze, however, is one-way – the man gazes and the woman (knowing she is watched) looks away.

Lines 12 - 15.

The focus returns initially to the speaker who remains in his position on the platform. We learn that in spite of his awareness of the girl attempting to turn her head away from him, he continues his '**scrutiny with unmitigated pleasure**' (line 13).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 12 - 15 (continued).

The word **'scrutiny'** is important here as it suggests that the speaker's gaze has an interrogative nature, which may be perceived as unwelcome by the person being subjected to this intense scrutiny. It is interesting that the speaker describes his time looking at the girl as pleasurable, indicating that he feels no remorse or guilt for staring so openly at someone else while he is married. For her part, the girl continues to appear reluctant to engage with the speaker and **'would not / glance at me in the silence'** (lines 14-5). Nevertheless, the speaker asserts that she is aware of the pleasure he is deriving from watching her and we might interpret her determination to avoid his gaze as an acknowledgement of the significance of this moment. It is unclear if this is a projection, but the first-person perspective lends weight to the man's assertion.

The presence of the **'clock'**, mentioned in the first line of the stanza, is also important here, reminding us that there is a time limit on this encounter. Time is fleeting and the fact that the speaker stands under the clock implies that time is, quite literally, hanging over him and lending a finite nature to the encounter. It also builds on the earlier statement that the speaker had arrived too early for the train, reminding the reader that had he not arrived at the wrong time then he would never have been there when this train arrived and would not have seen the girl at all. This is the shortest stanza in the poem (which has moved from six, to five and then four lines, perhaps indicating a slowing of activity in this moment).

Once again we are reminded that this is 'not Adlestrop', a reference which both connects to Thomas's poem and rejects it by reminding us that this unexpected moment has yielded a very different outcome to the unscheduled stop in Thomas's poem. In Thomas's poem the speaker uses the silences to listen to birdsong and enjoy his peaceful surroundings; in Abse's poem the **'silence'** (line 15) is a loaded one, filled with the tension of the speaker's illicit gaze.

Lines 16-22.

The last stanza is the longest of the poem and is, arguably, where the most notable events of the poem take place. These final lines mark a turning point in this unspoken exchange between the speaker and the girl on the train. As the train **'heave[s] noisily'** to leave the station, the silence of the previous stanza is broken and the poem changes momentum. The girl appears to be filled with confidence by the train and we are told that **'only then'** (line 17) does she smile back at the speaker. The movement of the train, carrying her away from the speaker and ensuring that this exchange can only be a fleeting one, seems to embolden the girl so that she feels secure enough to engage with him, even if only briefly.

The speaker's use of repetition becomes significant again at this point as he describes first the girl, and then himself, as suddenly feeling **'daring and secure'** (lines 18 and 19).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 16 - 22 (continued).

The fact that he describes them both in this way reflects the sudden moment of unity between them as they finally exchange smiles, briefly finding them in sync. They mirror each other here, with the speaker waving **'back at her waving'** (line 19) as he watches the train pull away from him. Their progression to waving is perhaps inspired by the pair's increased confidence as the train gathers speed, knowing that nothing more can come of this shared moment. The 'atrocious speed' gathered by the train as it leaves the station draws the pace of the poem on from the languid enjoyment of the brief moments described by the speaker in the earlier stanzas. The train, like time, is moving quickly and is beyond either person's control.

We return again to Edward Thomas's poem in the closing lines of 'Not Adlestrop', as the train moves towards **'Oxfordshire or Gloucestershire'**, evoking 'the birds / Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire' that sing at the end of Thomas's work. The return to the route laid out in Thomas's poem may be read as a return to the expected journey, suggesting that the pair will now continue with their respective travels as if this encounter had never happened.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 19 - 22 (continued).

These lines also present us with the death of the speaker's wife. Rather than the dance of earlier in the poem, however, death here is imagined as a bird's beak opening and a final sigh (i.e. a final breath) being released from it. Interestingly, Thomas describes this as a '**shedding**' of a sigh – precisely suggesting that something old and worn out is being got rid of by this process (in the way that a snake *sheds* its skin). Through this image, life itself seems to have been worn out. Indeed, the poem's final thought suggests just how insubstantial life is in any case: the wife's final breath is barely present at all, being '**no / heavier than a feather**' – insubstantial, delicate. Of course, the feather continues the poem's engagement with birds until the very end. But by the final line, there is nothing left of living birds – they have vanished. Instead, all that remains is a feather. Just like the woman's life in the poem, the life of the poem's imagery itself has drawn to a conclusion.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

Katie Gramich has described Abse as ‘a versatile and complex writer, erudite at one moment, broadly comic the next’ and we can note these traits in play within ‘Not Adlestrop’ (2). There is an easiness, verging on playfulness, about the speaker’s enjoyment of this unexpected encounter with the girl on the train, evident in his open description of his unconcealed pleasure as he watches her. Yet the simplicity of this scene conceals the complexity of Abse’s work in the poem as he echoes the language of Edward Thomas’s ‘Adlestrop’, borrowing sufficiently from Thomas’s language to connect the two poems, but manipulating it to create a very different scene. Abse demonstrates his versatility by opening the poem with an inversion of Thomas’s opening line and ending his poem, as Thomas’s closes, with the train speeding towards ‘**Oxfordshire or Gloucestershire**’. What is significant are the events which unfold between these points, in the mid-section of the poem; here Abse’s own poetic voice becomes the most dominant. The idea of reusing words and the theme of duality is continued throughout the poem, however, in Abse’s use of repetition. As well as emphasising the connection between the speaker and the girl on the train, this repetition acts as a subtle reminder of the way Abse’s poem borrows from Thomas’s.

The language in the poem is accessible and confessional, the speaker talking honestly of his feelings as he sees the girl on the train. At times there is a casual tone to the poem, as when the speaker describes how he came to be at the station too early, and in the use of italics to emphasise certain words, such as how the girl is ‘**very, very pretty**’. Nevertheless, there are some moments where the language becomes more poetic, for example, when the speaker describes how the girl may have ‘**divined the married life in me**’. Such phrasing adds a romantic element to the poem, perhaps used by the poet to encourage the reader to imagine the emotional drama of the scene.

Sound is also a recurring theme in the poem which, although mentioned only briefly by the speaker, plays an important part in setting the tone for the events which occur. In contrast to Thomas’s poem where it is in the moments of silence, broken only by birdsong, that the speaker finds a sense of peace, the silence in Abse’s poem characterises a moment of tension and awkwardness. It is in ‘the silence of not Adlestrop’ that the girl turns her head in an attempt to avoid the speaker’s gaze, and in the noise of the train as it ‘**jolted**’ and moves forward that she feels the confidence to smile and then wave back at her admirer. The true moment of connection happens surrounded by the noise and speed of a moving train, creating a sense of irony within the poem.

The scene of the departing train propels the man and woman into the role of lovers, loathe to part, and recalls the many partings on platforms that became part of the iconography of the First World War, though the gender roles are inverted. One wonders if it is all a fantasy.

(2) Katie Gramich, ‘Welsh Writing and the British Dimension’, in M. Wynn Thomas, ed., *Welsh Writing in English*, vol. VII (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 255–77: p. 258.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What does the poem have to say about the importance of living in the moment?

How is body language important in the poem?

How do the reader's feelings about the speaker change as they read the poem?

The poem uses repetition throughout; what effect does this repetition have?

PHOTOGRAPHS

- <http://www.amitlennon.com/amitsphotos/2014/10/8/dannie-abse-poet#.W4XSavZFzIU>
- <http://www.dannieabse.com/>

The first photo is an image of Abse as a younger man, pictured at Ogmores beach with his wife, Joan. The image offers an insight into the relationship between Dannie and Joan, who died following a tragic car accident in 2005.

The second photo depicts an older Abse in a relaxed moment at his North London home in 2007. The shot captures the hope and love of life which characterise Abse's work and demonstrate his resilience, even in the wake of personal loss.

- <https://www.mediastorehouse.com/steam/places/stations-halts-gloucestershire-stations-adlestrop-station/adlestrop-station-1933-11923252.html>

This image is a photo of the train station 'Adlestrop' as it looked when it was still in use in 1933. The station was closed in 1966 when all sidings were also removed from the stop. A sign from the railway line which bore the name 'Adlestrop' was moved to a bus shelter in the nearby town following the closure of the train station, along with a plaque which is engraved with Edward Thomas's poem about the station.

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Details of Abse's life and career, including information about his many publications and audio recordings of Abse reading his poem are available at:

<http://www.dannieabse.com/>

The British Council Literature website offers a biography of Abse, along with a complete bibliography of his work and a list of the awards secured by Abse throughout his career:

<https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/dannie-abse>

A biographical summary, including some of Abse's literary influences and readings of his poems, can be found at:

<https://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/dannie-abse>

A thought-provoking 'in conversation' interview with a reflective Dannie Abse is available at:

www.walesartsreview.org/in-conversation-with-dannie-abse/

All links are clickable



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August 2018



We are grateful for the financial support of the College of Arts and Humanities, Swansea University, CREW - Centre for Research into the English Literature and Language of Wales, The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh Writing in English.

John Tripp

'Walnut Tree Forge'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

John Tripp was born in Bargoed in 1927. His father was a farrier from Cornwall who moved to south Wales to find work after the First World War. In 1933, Paul and his wife Muriel moved the family down to the new housing estate in Whitchurch, Cardiff. Paul supported the family with his business, Oak Tree Forge in Taff's Well, which he ran until it was demolished to make way for the A470 bypass in 1969.

Although Oak Tree Forge bore the sign 'H.P. Tripp and Son: Smiths', John never worked at the family business. In stark contrast to his father's work as a skilled physical labourer, John spent most of his career working, in one way or another, with words. Leaving school aged 16 in 1943, he found work as a clerk with the BBC in Cardiff, and later, after three years of National Service, he moved to London. After another period at the BBC, he went on to work as a press assistant for the Indonesian Embassy, where he stayed for eleven years, before moving back to Cardiff to become a full-time freelance writer in 1969.

In the early 1960s, Tripp had met a group of Welsh writers living in London, later to become the 'Guild of Welsh Writers', and it was around this time that he became more aware of his roots in Wales and of Welsh politics. His first collection of poetry, *Diesel to Yesterday* (1966), was a biting critical view of contemporary Welsh society: in particular, its consumerist excesses, its pretensions, and what he viewed as the problem of Wales' relationship with England. He would pursue these themes over the course of several more books of poetry and prose essays until his early death, at home in his father's house in Whitchurch, in 1986.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

In the 1966 poem 'Diesel to Yesterday', Tripp memorably described himself as a 'modern who reeks of the museum'. Often in his writing, he contrasted the superficialities of the present day with images of an idealised past. In his later poetry, he became increasingly nostalgic, and looked back to his childhood as a source of solace, a time unspoiled by what he saw as the empty materialist excesses of modern life. 'Walnut Tree Forge' is one such poem from his last collection, *Passing Through* (1984). It recalls his experiences as a young boy at his father's smithy, watching his father at work.

The title is, on one level, an obvious reference to 'Oak Tree Forge', Tripp's father's smithy. However, its signifiers of natural imagery ('**Walnut Tree**') and a bygone working environment ('**Forge**') also signal the broader symbolism of the poem as a whole. Although written in the 1980s, the poem paints a vivid, pastoral picture of an older era, now largely lost, in which people were closer to the natural environment, and work, more often than not, involved physical labour.

Form.

The poem consists of four septets. These relatively long stanzas give the poem a bulky physical appearance on the page, each perhaps resembling the anvil on which his father would have worked his horseshoes, or the four hooves of the horses themselves. There is no regular rhythm or rhyme scheme, but the poem uses a range of prosodic devices throughout to convey its theme. It is phrased in an understated, everyday idiom, with only subtle lyrical embellishments. The poem also refrains from capitalising new lines: this is a technique Tripp uses in many of his poems to convey a sense of unpretentious informality.

Stanza 1, lines 1-7.

Although the poem takes the form of a memory of a day that passed many decades earlier, the use of the simple past tense in the first stanza creates a vivid sense of immediacy, as though the events occurred very recently.

Tripp was famously dismissive of what he viewed as the frivolous excesses of modern life, and this poem, with its emphasis on the physical nature of his father's work, presents a vision of authenticity and vitality in stark contrast with this. Lines 1 and 2 immediately set up an important distinction between the vitality of his father's occupation ('**My father shod horses**') and the perceived frivolity of the speaker's own life (though the poem is clearly autobiographical, the speaker is not necessarily Tripp himself). The speaker recalls his father hard at work at a traditional, physical trade, one strongly redolent of an older way of life, while he plays at a childish game.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The stanza also establishes the poem's symbolic connection between the physicality of the father's work and the dynamism of the natural environment. This is achieved through the image of the kingfisher. This is a striking image of physical vitality: the kingfisher, **'like a blue-green streak'** (line 4), bursts in and out of the water in its hunt for food. It is an image of graceful power, and Tripp uses enjambment, the sentence running across the lines, to convey the fluent physical movement of the bird as it darts **'clean[ly]'** in and out of the water. Like his father, the kingfisher sees the immediate fruits of its labour: it catches a fish and takes it back to its hole in the bank. The phrase **'fish-boned'** conveys a sense of the ongoing life-cycle of this natural environment.

Stanza 1, lines 8-14.

Like the first, this stanza begins with the words **'My father'**. Indeed, in the first lines of all four stanzas, the poet's father is focalised, serving to present him as the symbolic centre of the poem: filling the frame, so to speak. The repetition perhaps also emphasises the repetitive, physical nature of his work.

Lines 10-12 pursue the sense of the physicality of his father's labour, and the sheer strength and power necessary to do it. Again, enjambment is used to convey a sense of physical movement, with the sentence exceeding the confines of the ends of the lines, while line breaks emphasise words associated with labour: **'work', 'rest', 'back', 'heat', 'skill'** and **'rag'**. The stanza as a whole focuses on the image of his father's body in motion: he **'leans against the door', 'bend[s]', 'wipe[s] his brow'**. Again, his father is connected with the natural environment: through the **'big and restless'** horse he supports with his back, and in connection with the elegant kingfisher; he asks knowingly **'Did you see a kingfisher, then?'** Perhaps overcome by a sense of awe, the young Tripp cannot speak in reply, only nod.

Lines 15-21.

Here Tripp further hammers home the thematic contrast between authenticity and superficiality, figuring this through a distinction between two types of horse. As a farrier, Tripp's father would have spent much of his time making and repairing the shoes of 'draft' or working horses, those working on local farms, or in the coalmines of the south Wales valleys. This stanza makes clear that his father didn't enjoy working on horses bred for show or racing, rather than work. The images of strength and graceful power seen in stanzas 1 and 2 are contrasted with images of unwieldy heaviness (**'all rump'** and **'heavy'** only with the weight of the **'spoilt pride of their runners'**) and showy superficiality (**'cockade gloss'**). In contrast to working horses, the show horses are temperamental, **'spoilt'** and **'pampered'**.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Stanza 4, lines 22-28

Unlike the preceding stanzas, which foreground a sense of the physicality of the father's trade and the natural environment of which he is aware, the first four lines of the final stanza are slightly more detached and analytical. Tripp makes observations about what he has recalled, and draws conclusions about the difference between his fathers' experience of the day and his own, which hint at broader differences between their life experiences, and also, perhaps, political differences. If the driving force of the poem is Tripp's value judgement of the distance between the older era he recalls and the modern-day society he occupies, then lines 22-23 suggest his father would not have made such a distinction: **'It was labour to him, one more task / for a pound'**.

The speaker of the poem goes on to explain that for him, the days spent with his father were worth much more than money could buy: it was a **'golden time'**. The ironic connection between time and monetary value shows up the perceived worthlessness of money itself. The idea of the time spent with his father being **'freedom / from arithmetic'** has a similar double meaning, implying both time spent away from school, but also freedom from the money-driven adult society of which activities like arithmetic are a part. There is a note of melancholy in his realisation that this is time used up **'so easily'** (line 26), which further reinforces the sense that time has an unquantifiable emotional value.

The final three lines close the poem with a resounding nostalgic image that returns us to the uncorrupted idyll of the afternoon the poem is recalling. Whatever the differences between the speaker and his father, they are here pictured together, **'just the two of us'**. The penultimate line – **'the ring of the shoes hitting the pin'** – is a masterful phrase: the assonance of the repeated 'i' sound (ring, hitting, pin) resonates from the past into the present: like the memory itself. This runs on into the final line which is the poem's longest, suggesting the speaker does not want the memory to end, or that the memory lingers. The poem closes with the warmly nostalgic yet, again, melancholic image of **'the long-ago sun'**, sadly emphasising the distance between the speaker's present and this idyllic past.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

John Tripp was a poet with strong social and national convictions. Much of his poetry decries what he viewed as the excesses and superficialities of modern society. 'Walnut Tree Forge' explores these themes by recalling a memory of an idealised past: a day spent as a child at his father's forge.

The poem is set resolutely in the past. Though expressed as a memory of a day that passed many decades ago, it paints a vivid picture. The speaker's father is the symbolic focus of the poem: he is foregrounded in every stanza, and is constructed as the embodiment of an older era of authentic, skilled, physical labour. This work is, moreover, associated – almost conflated – with images of the natural environment: the father's physical skill and strength are connected to images of the vitality of that environment: the **'blue-green streak'** of a kingfisher; the **'big and restless'** shire horse. The effect is to conjure a sense of a social order more closely connected to the rhythms of the natural world. Such a sense is constructed in stark contrast to the world Tripp felt himself to inhabit, writing the poem in 1980s Wales. Indeed, in the complete absence of commentary on it, the present day is a palpable presence that haunts this poem.

Underlying the images of physical labour and the natural environment is a sense of melancholic nostalgia. In reality, Tripp's father's forge had been demolished to make way for a new road years before the poem was written. The new A470 bypass connected the city of Cardiff with the rest of Wales, heralding a new Welsh society and economy: one no longer built on physical labour or the natural environment. For Tripp, this represented a violent historical lurch forward, perhaps in the wrong direction. The poem, in its vivid, nostalgic depiction of a bygone era, embodies this sense of irrecoverable loss, as summed up in the lyrical final lines, which paint a memorable image of an idyllic childhood spent in **'the long-ago sun.'**

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What words and images does the speaker use to describe his father?
What is the emotional affect of these words?

What images of the natural environment can you find? How are these described?

How does the speaker describe the 'big horses/made for show'?
What values are being represented and critiqued here?

How important is nostalgia in this poem? What words are associated with nostalgia (a longing for the past)?

PHOTOGRAPHS



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<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/36361>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Poet Peter Finch recalls John Tripp:

<https://www.iwa.wales/click/2010/10/the-bare-essential-john-tripp/>

Draft/working horse:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Draft_horse#/media/File:Aa_shirehorse.jpg

Footage of a farrier at work:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZQ81i_HJ5o

Footage of horseshoe game:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHD_nG8uY1Y

Show horse:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/genewolf/5150843877>



Swansea University
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August, 2019

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Bryn Griffiths

'Dying at Pallau'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Bryn Griffiths was born in Swansea in 1933. At 17, he first went to sea, serving several years in the Merchant Navy, before studying at Coleg Harlech. He worked as a journalist, broadcaster and television scriptwriter in London, founding the Welsh Writers’ Guild in the 1960s alongside other writers including John Tripp and Sally Roberts. His first collection of poems, *The Mask of Pity*, published in 1966, was interested in the history and landscapes of Wales, particularly the lower Swansea Valley, devastated by the Industrial Revolution, and he edited the anthology *Welsh Voices* (1967). Other significant collections include *The Stones Remember* (1967), *Scars* (1969) and *The Survivors* (1971).

Griffiths subsequently lived for many years in Australia, and in 1985 was appointed writer-in-residence to the Australian Merchant Navy, spending further time at sea and writing a number of the poems collected in *Sea Poems* (1988). He received the Community Cultural Development Board’s 2004 Ros Bower Memorial Award for his commitment to the principle of giving all Australians the right to access the arts.

‘Dying at Pallau’ can be understood in the context of a number of other significant poems by Welsh writers, and in the context of some significant British poems that were written in the 1940s and 1950s. In the time it spends with a dying man it is reminiscent of the R. S. Thomas poem ‘Evans,’ while its use of weather to express the emotions of the poem’s subject is reminiscent both of ‘Wind’ by Ted Hughes and ‘All Day It Has Rained’ by Alun Lewis.

Another important context to consider is the representation of farming in Wales. The presentation of rural workers in poems by R. S. Thomas such as ‘The Airy Tomb’ is a useful resource here.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The title gives us, in an accessible fashion, the immediate subject of the poem. Pallau is a farm in north Pembrokeshire: the poet has chosen as his setting a place which is real and which is also slightly obscure and out-of-the-way. In choosing a real place, and in naming the man the poem describes as **'Tom Davies,'** we are very much given the sense of authenticity in this poem, of a real life ending, and this deepens the poem's emotional power. The other important thing about the title is its choice of present tense – **'Dying.'** There's a distinctive approach to elegy here, in that the poem focuses mostly on the time immediately before Tom's death and his dramatic suffering. Although we are told more than once that the events of the poem are in the past – **'I remember him now,'** **'I remember him that night'** – the poem also includes a number of echoes of the title's present tense: **'Lying,'** **'Praying,'** **'breathing,'** **'exploding,'** **'living.'** In this sense, Tom Davies is continuing to die whenever the reader comes to the poem, however long ago the actual death was, and this heightens the poem's drama. It also supports the sense in the poem's last lines of the house and **'the memory of his life'** living on: the poem, and even its deathly title, facilitates exactly that.

Form.

The poem has a largely free verse form, with no real consistency of metre or line length, or of stanza form. One notable feature is that each stanza is framed as a single sentence, with ellipsis used as well as dashes to facilitate the evasion of a full stop until the end of the stanza. The poem of course is in essence an evasion of the end of its subject's life, focusing on the process of dying, as the title suggests, rather than on the death, so it is easy to see a parallel between subject and this formal choice. The long and complex sentences also give a sense of energy, sustained by some of the language choices: **'wild,'** **'rushing,'** **'spilled and ran,'** **'exploding,'** **'warring.'** It's a curiously energetic poem given the nature of its subject, and this both adds drama to the depiction of the man's suffering and substance to the concluding stanza's sense of the man living on.

The poem is also structured around repetition, with both stanzas one and three beginning with a version of **'I remember him.'** Stanza two, by contrast, begins with the man's name: the stanza gives the man the importance which the whole poem does. Another notable repetition is the word **'Beat'** at the start of lines four and five. Beginning these lines with this forceful stressed syllable again deepens the drama of the man's suffering.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-8.

The opening line of the poem places the events it describes firmly in the past: **'I remember him now as he was then'**. There's a tension here with the present tense of the title and the way in which the poem's vivid imagery causes the reader to share Tom Davies's last hours with him. The fact that the first thing the poem tells us is that witnessing Tom Davies's last hours has stayed with the speaker both gives us a dramatic preparation for the events of the poem and contributes to the poem's concluding sense that the subject will live on. The use of first person in this opening and the sense that the events can be remembered establishes them as real, adding to the sense of authenticity which is created in the poem.

The weather on the night of the death is described with consistent drama, and can be seen as an example of pathetic fallacy, when the weather enacts the emotion of the poem. We are initially given a number of 'w' sounds, which perhaps enact the sound of the weather: **'wild' 'Wales,' 'when the wind'**. These give way to the plosive consonants of **'Beat'** at the start of lines five and six. The movement from the softer 'w' sound to the harsh 'b' sound increases the impact of the latter, exaggerating the sense of drama here to describe the weather and, by extension, the drama of the man's death. The alliterative 's' and 'sh' in **'surf,' 'rushing'** and **'trees'** onomatopoeically suggests the sound of wind. The vocabulary describing the weather is violent, which again is obviously a description both of the weather and of the man's experience: **'the wind stole breath and the bombing rain,' 'the drowned fields'**.

The farm in this poem, initially established in this first stanza, offers us an exposed setting, where **'the bombing rain/Beat against the farmhouse windows.'** Among the interesting things is that, while the poem's title is very specific in terms of place, by line three of the poem we have broadened out from **'Pallau'** to a **'wild night in Wales.'** This appears to make explicit the allegorical aspects of the poem, that Tom Davies and the farm at Pallau are representative of much wider forces in Welsh life.

These lines also have a number of images of violence which might be best understood in the context of World War Two: **'the bombing rain,' 'the rain exploding.'** The poet would have been eight years old at the time of the Blitz, and there certainly seem to be echoes of that Swansea experience in this imagery.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 9-10.

The last two lines of the stanza make clear that this is an emotive family death-bed scene, the gravity of Tom Davies's situation resulting in a return of his children: **'And his children, come again to his side,/Praying away the waters of his death.'** This combination of religious and water imagery, and the power with which the weather is described, might remind us of the biblical image of the flood, heightening the elemental drama of this situation. It's perhaps interesting that the children are **'praying'** not **'crying,'** though a case can be made that a stanza which has been full of violent images and the aggression of the natural world does need to end with a forceful line like **'praying away the waters of his death.'**

The other aspect which might be worth considering in these lines is the extent to which the presence of the children might contribute to the symbolic way in which we can read this death. As we find out at the start of stanza two, the subject of the poem, Tom Davies, is inextricably linked with his farm: he is **'Tom Davies of Pallau: farmer and man'** and is farmer first, man second. He is a **'Deacon and teacher of the green and country crafts/To the changing children.'** While farming is central to his life then, it may not be to the next generation, who are **'changing'**: his own children have **'come again to his side'** to **'Pray...away the waters of his death'**. This might suggest that his children have grown away from the farm, returning only as a result of the threat to their father's life. Might the death of a farmer which this poem describes therefore be symbolic of changes in agriculture and of a generation moving away from the work of their parents – the wider death of a way of life?

Lines 11-18.

This stanza opens by naming the person and the place. After the imagery and the drama of stanza one, there is a focus in the opening clauses here on factual information: **'Tom Davies of Pallau', 'Eighty-seven years'**. This factual tone very much allows us to see Tom Davies as a real person. This is important because it gives the poem emotional power, but it doesn't diminish the poem's ability to also establish Tom and his situation as representative of wider trends in Welsh life. While we can assume from the poem that Tom Davies is a real person who the poet has spent time with, it does no harm at all that his name is a common one. Just as R. S. Thomas writes about the suffering of 'Evans,' so the common name of the man here allows us all to connect with the experience.

The factual tone of the opening of the stanza gives way in line two to the metaphor, **'this cage of toil.'** The meaning here is open-ended. The **'cage of toil'** could be considered as the embodied life that Tom will soon be leaving, but it could also represent life on the farm or, by extension, life in Wales.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The first four lines of the stanza very much enlarge and expand Tom Davies as a figure, his roles, his significance, an impact generated by the multiple use of **'and'** and the multiple use of semi-colons to establish a list. He is **'farmer and man', 'Deacon and teacher of the green and country crafts/ To the changing children, growing into peace...'** Davies would not be limited in his life, those **'and's'** imply, and this sense is increased by that big number, **'Eighty-seven.'** At the end of line four, **'peace'** is followed not by a full stop but, fittingly, by an ellipsis: Davies's life was so expansive, the implication is, that it can't be housed in a traditional, limited sentence. This ellipsis also follows a reference to children - **'the changing children, growing into peace'** - enacting the sense of Davies's life going on after his death, because of his contribution to the next generation. Just as the sentence's end is not an ending, so Davies's death is not an ending: he continues to live on through the next generation. The life that will continue is a different one to the one Davies experienced, with the violence of stanza one, resonant of World War Two, giving way to the **'peace'** the children are **'growing into.'** There is perhaps an echo here of R. S. Thomas's idea in 'The Peasant' that the farmer is **'a winner of wars,'** battling with the elements as Davies does in this poem.

The expansiveness of the first four lines of this stanza, of Davies's life, is reversed in the second half of the stanza, with a focus on a weak body and on parts of that body. He is **'willow-thin'**, we are told, with **'all his death apparent/ In a hand's thin bone'**. The use of synecdoche is telling here as the whole of the man, the whole of the suffering, becomes focused on one part of the body, the process of dying reducing and reducing him. It's especially telling of course that it is the hand that is used to symbolise the failing strength, with all the work and usefulness of which it would once have been capable. It's also telling that he is described as **'willow-thin'**: just as the threat to him is described in stanza one as the way the wind **'Beat through the surf of rushing trees,'** so Davies's body is itself now described as tree-like.

The final three lines of the stanza are full of plosive sounds - **'apparent,' 'bone,' 'breathing,' 'pressure'** - and even more full of sibilant 's' sounds, in **'his,' 'hand's,' 'harshly,' 'pressure'** and **'years'**. These sounds seem to enact the difficulty of breathing which they describe.

Lines 19-25.

The opening of the third stanza returns us to the poem's opening line, with the non-specific **'then'** in line one of the first stanza being replaced now with the very specific **'that night'**. This again leads us in the direction of being encouraged to share this specific experience with this man. The first word of the line, **'Aye,'** suggests the intimacy of the spoken voice, and cuts against the lyrical descriptions of the violence of the weather in the poem, to create the impression of a real speaker who is connecting directly with us. There appears to be an echo here of R. S. Thomas's approach in 'Cynddylan on a Tractor,' where a highly crafted poem using metaphor and rhyme begins with a very spoken **'Ah'**, connecting the reader directly to the speaker and the experience.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

This stanza also returns us to the imagery of the first stanza in the violence of the way the weather is described. The first stanza's **'bombing rain'** now becomes **'the rain exploding'**, contrasting the children 'growing into peace' in stanza two. This power of the rain, and the **'vast echo/ Of the wind'** contrasts the weakness of Tom Davies's voice: **'whispered'** and **'barely heard'**. The man is seen as powerless in the face of the enormous destructive strength of the weather, and yet the **'room-reflecting window-panes'** would enlarge the place, perhaps intensifying his suffering by replicating his image. Such reproduction of this suffering is also a way of ensuring the man's survival of course, because this poem, too, represents that suffering: all those images of suffering from stanza two, such as **'the pressure of his farming years'** are still in our minds as we consider these reflections, and are further reminded of the suffering through the phrase **'as he slowly died.'** The poem allows him to continue to live, as surely as those window-panes copy the image of the room.

It's telling that what Davies **'whispered'** and what is **'barely heard'** is a **'Welsh greeting,'** and this opens up an allegorical reading that this poem is not just about the death of Davies or of a way of work but also about threats to a language that went along with it. While the poem's speaker is given a spoken **'Aye'**, the words of Davies are not given to us. This distances us from Davies and, if this is an allegory about the threats to a language, the fact that we don't get Davies's actual words would seem to enact this.

The last two lines of the stanza are built around an opposition which dramatizes and emphasises the man's dying, as we are told that **'the kindness'** is **'living'** (present tense) in his eyes, **'As he slowly died'** (past tense). **'The attic of his days'** is a really interesting image. Unlike the 'room-reflecting window-panes' which reproduce the man's image, as this poem does, the reference to an attic carries a suggestion that dying puts your life away, stores you, makes you less public. Attics are often associated with the mind in literature (and Freudian symbolism) so there is a sense also of being stored away in the memory. The connection between the man and the place, the farm, has been there throughout the poem: when the man's name is introduced, he is **'Tom Davies of Pallau,'** while **'the creaking house'** seems to speak of his own age and physical weakness. If he is a house, then death is **'the attic'** of that house, and this may well be seen as an echo of the last stanza of Dylan Thomas's 'Fern Hill,' another poem which explores the intimate connection between person and place. The final stanza of that poem offers the assertion that **'time would take me/ Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand.'**

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 26-28.

The last three lines of the poem return us to the first stanza, with nothing having changed, and yet everything having changed. The **'creaking house'** of stanza one is **'creaking still'** and the violent weather returns, again described with repeated 'w' sounds: **'the warring winds,' 'the weathers of Wales'**. Whereas these 'w' sounds moved towards the hard 'b' sounds of **'bombing rain'** and the repetition of **'Beat'** in stanza one, though, here they lead us to a harmonic mixture of half- and full- end rhyme: **'days,' 'Wales,' 'ways.'** As throughout the poem, the use of a phrase like **'all the weathers of Wales'** may be a way of enlarging the drama of the situation, but it could also be read as the situation in the poem being representative of wider aspects of national life.

The softer music of this stanza is apposite given the gentler meaning of these lines. The violence of the suffering the poem has described is gone. **'The old house'** which has become intimately linked with and representative of Tom Davies in the course of the poem **'lives on'** and it is **'imbued with the memory of his life and gentle ways.'** One thing which is interesting about this last line is the imprecision of its language - **'imbued,' 'memory'** and **'life'** are all very abstract and **'ways'** is quite non-specific. The absence of objects and concrete nouns makes this line difficult to visualise. One argument that can be made is that the imprecision here is consistent with a poem which has distanced us from its central character: we do not know the words of his Welsh greeting, would not be able to describe his face. But another argument is that the vagueness of this last line is the complete opposite of a number of the poem's earlier details, including a phrase like **'all his death apparent/ In a hand's thin bone.'** This is visual, visceral and concrete. An argument that can be made here then is that, just as suffering has reduced Tom Davies to parts of his body, so this last line of the poem seeks to expand him again, leaving things open-ended for him to continue to grow, rather than seeking to pin him down.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'Dying at Pallau' is a poem which encourages us as readers to share the death of one man, Tom Davies. Although our attention is drawn to the fact that the speaker can remember the events the poem describes, allowing a distance from the events which is perhaps necessary so that the emotion of the poem does not become overwhelming, enough of the poem happens in the present tense, and there is enough physical detail of the man's suffering, to feel that the **'dying'** is happening now, whenever the reader reads the poem. The poem generates the sense that the events described really happened by naming the man and the place, and by the sense that the speaker can remember them. The ending conveys the sense that the man can live on because his house lives on: it's also true that he can live on because this poem has been written, allowing each new reader to share with Tom Davies the last hours of his life.

Key to the poem's strategies are the connection it establishes between the place and the person: he is **'Tom Davies of Pallau'** and the **'creaking house'** is therefore representative of him. Set against this is the threatening violence of the weather, which sets this poem in a tradition of pathetic fallacy which includes the storm in *King Lear*, which is again seen to be an external manifestation of the suffering of an old man. If Tom Davies doesn't match Lear's rage, he is similarly powerless.

One question which is worth asking about this poem is whether it seeks to eulogise one man or whether Tom Davies is symbolic of something larger, as well as being himself. Tom Davies is **'Deacon and teacher of the green and country crafts/ To the changing children, growing into peace...'** while Davies's own children have clearly gone away from the farming life, as they are now **'come again to his side.'** Davies is also eulogised here in an English-language poem, though he offers a **'Welsh greeting'**. The very act of choosing to eulogise someone in a poem must make them, to an extent, a representative figure: is Griffiths also eulogising a particular way of life, work or language?

Perhaps, though, the poem is more interested in one real death than it is in making Davies's experiences symbolic. For all the **'memory of his life and gentle ways'** that the poem's last line offers us, it's the close details of Davies's body which stay with us after reading, **'all his death apparent/In a hand's thin bone.'** The empathetic connection this poem gives each reader with a man they never met, and with his final suffering, hugely enriches us.

SIX QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

- Why do you think the poet begins the poem, and later repeats, the idea that 'I remember him'? How does this framing device change the impact of the poem?
- How do you think Tom Davies would feel if he could read this poem? How might his children react?
- What sorts of things do you think Tom's children would do with their lives after their father's death? Do you think the Pallau farm is still in the family now?
- What relationship does the house have to what's going on with Tom? And what about the weather?
- What do you think of the ending's idea that Tom's memory will live on through the house? Does this convince you, or is it the poet's wishful thinking or self-comforting? Can Tom live on through this poem?
- Is this poem about Tom's death? Or everyone's?

PHOTOGRAPHS



Photo by permission of Bryn Griffiths.

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

The author's own website, with a biography and bibliography: blog.bryngriffiths.net

A press release regarding Bryn Griffiths's donation of papers to Swansea University, outlining his important connections in English-language poetry from Wales in the 1960s: www-2018.swansea.ac.uk/press-office/news-archive/2015/swanseawriterpoetandmarinerdonatespaperstoswanseauniversity.php

'Wind' by Ted Hughes: genius.com/Ted-hughes-wind-annotated

Photographs and information about the impact of the Blitz on Swansea: swansea.gov.uk/article/57405/The-Three-Nights-Blitz

'Welsh writing in English: Case studies in cultural interaction' by Gareth Ian Evans: core.ac.uk/reader/161880577
The thesis includes coverage of Bryn Griffiths's writing about Australia, and may provide useful background.

Information regarding Bryn Griffiths's work as an arts activist in Australia and its recognition there is available here: australiacouncil.gov.au/news/media-centre/media-releases/writer-and-trade-unionist-wins-key-arts-prize-2/

This article from *The Guardian* establishes Eglwysrwr, the nearest village to Pallau, as 'the UK's wettest village' - which given the content of this poem, is not without relevance! The article and pictures give a good sense of the community and part of the world in which the poem is set: theguardian.com/global/2016/jan/17/welsh-village-hoping-to-become-kingdom-of-rains-with-ignoble-record

Pallau is given in a list of historic placenames and the map gives the farm c.1900:

historicplacenames.rcahmw.gov.uk/placenames/recordedname/be148015-9cc8-4976-82f5-fc35645133c8

Jonathan Edwards

Author of My Family and Other Superheroes and Gen (Seren Books)
July, 2021



We are grateful for the financial support of Swansea University, The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh Writing in English.

Alun Rees

'My Mother's Mother'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Alun Rees was born in Merthyr Tydfil in 1937, and educated at Cardiff and Sheffield universities. He became a journalist in London in his twenties, working for local papers until he joined the *Sunday Telegraph* sports staff. Returning to Wales, he was a rugby and cricket writer with the *South Wales Echo* and *Western Mail*, and was named BT Welsh Sports Writer of the Year in 1998. His poem ‘Taffy is a Welshman’ was the inaugural winner of the Harri Webb Prize in 1988. He is a member of the Red Poets collective, and a contributor to their publications and readings. His collections of poetry are *My Name is Legend* (1962), *Release John Lucifer!* (1973), *Kicking Lou’s Arse* (2004), *Yesterday’s Tomorrow* (2005) and *Ballad of the Black Domain* (2021).

As a poet, Rees explores the radical history of Wales and gives voice to the marginalised. As Kate Jones puts it in her review of Rees’s collection *Yesterday’s Tomorrow*, his poetry expresses ‘socialist ideals, attacks capitalism from a socialist perspective, [and] puts forward a socialist alternative.’ The writing of Harri Webb and Mike Jenkins offers good context in which to understand Rees’s work, and ‘My Mother’s Mother’ can be read in this sense, as celebrating the life of **‘Mrs Williams the fish-shop, next door to Zion’** – the sort of person that poetry often ignores.

Perhaps an even more useful context in which to read this poem is the nature of communities in the south Wales valleys, and the closeness of the people who live in them. These are communities in which people, as in Rees’s poem, are frequently known by their profession and by where they live.

The final aspect of context worth bearing in mind in relation to this poem is the central position of the chapel in valleys villages and towns at the time Rees is writing about. For many places in the valleys, the Zion Baptist chapel was an important community hub, central to village life and routines, and Rees’s poem sketches the way in which things have changed in its subject’s lifetime: **‘She could remember days when people meant it / to hail in song the power of Jesu’s name’**.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

This poem is a celebration of a grandmother, and it contrasts the speaker's loving memories of his grandmother, with the more superficial view of her held by 'the neighbours.' The title's personal pronoun therefore gives us the connection between speaker and subject. It is interesting that 'My Mother's Mother' is preferred to 'My Grandmother'. This is perhaps a way of making the poem's title more distinctive, the unusual phrasing grabbing us from the outset. There are two ways of reading the impact of this unusual title choice in terms of how it causes us to see the relationship between the speaker and the grandmother. One is that it could create distance between the speaker and the grandmother: 'my mother's mother' could seem like a less direct relationship than 'my grandmother.' Another way of reading this unusual title though, perhaps fitting with the close relationship between speaker and grandparent which is observable in the poem, is that it works to strengthen the connection between the speaker and the grandmother, by giving us also the connection they both share to the speaker's mother, placing the grandmother clearly in the strong matriarchal line.

Form.

'My Mother's Mother' is presented as a single stanza. The lines are not consistently metric, and the poem fits into no particular traditional form. This plainness feels right for the subject and intent of the poem. This is a celebration of a person from whom poetry has traditionally turned away; the poem as such turns away from the stronger traditional forms. The result is that the poem's language is accessible, not rendered awkward by an overly complex form. The poem is in part about what people say about each other, not what they *write* about each other: you can sense the spoken connections between people, how they talk about each other in a community in the first two lines, for example. A plainness of language and form seems useful to enact this.

While the poem doesn't aim for metrical consistency, there are lines which fit the model of iambic pentameter quite closely. Notably, these tend to coincide with places where the speaker is idealising the grandmother, the metrical strength of the lines well-matched to the romantic vision the speaker has of her: 'with **kindness in her hands**. No **starving cat** /called **at** her **door in vain**, and **no sun shone** /without the **gift of her rare happiness**.' As in most lines of iambic pentameter, it is quite possible to spot the occasional conflict in these lines between spoken and metrical stress: we would probably stress '**called**' rather than '**at**' in speech at the start of line five for example, and '**rare**' rather than '**her**' in line six. But what is clear is that the metrical template is strongly there, whereas it is very difficult to identify in the poem's first line. Rees's form is sufficiently versatile, then, to allow him close rhythmic effects to enact the differing moods of sections of the poem.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The most significant formal feature of this poem is the repetition of the exact same line at the start and end. This has great impact. At the start of the poem, the subject is only **'Mrs Williams the fish-shop, next door to Zion'**. By the end, we know her as so much more – as someone special enough, indeed, to write a poem about. Repeating this first line at the end of the poem therefore allows emphasis to be given to the distance we have travelled in our understanding of this woman. This distance makes the last line emotive, and emphasises the achievement of Rees's poem, in transforming our perception of its subject in just eighteen lines.

Lines 1–6.

The poem's opening lines immediately set up a distinction between the neighbours, who remember Mrs Williams in one way, and the speaker, who remembers her with more detail. For the neighbours, she is 'Mrs Williams the fish-shop, next door to Zion'; for the speaker she is 'a small, thin woman / with kindness in her hands.' The neighbours' perception of Mrs Williams can be understood in terms of a tradition, widespread in the close communities of Wales, of naming people by their trades – Dai the fish, John the bread, Billy the taps and so on.

The way that Rees chooses to order these opening sentences is significant, giving us the more superficial perception of his grandmother first, in the first two lines, before problematising and elaborating on this: he sets up first a limited perception of Mrs Williams, to give his writing something to react to. The way that these first two sentences invert each other structurally is also subtle and interesting. The opening sentence gives us the perception of Mrs Williams first, in line one, followed by information on who holds this opinion (**'the neighbours'**), in line two. The second sentence starts with the person holding the opinion (**'I'**) before moving on to how the speaker views the grandmother, in the second half of line three. This inversion at the level of sentence structure perhaps draws particular attention to the way that second sentence starts with **'I'**, giving priority and power to the speaker's opinion of the grandmother, as a result of the personal connection.

In lines 4–6 the grandmother is to some extent idealised, as we are told that **'No starving cat / called at her door in vain, and no sun shone / without the gift of her rare happiness.'** It is again worth looking at the way the poet orders things here, moving from the plain description of her as a **'small, thin woman,'** through the detail of the cat, to the much more superlative claim that the sentence ends with, **'no sun shone / without the gift of her rare happiness.'** We can read **'rare happiness'** here, not in the sense that the grandmother is rarely happy but that she is able to access a sort of happiness that not many people can – a special sort of happiness. The poet leads us then, step by step, away from the simplification of the poem's first line, to a much more aggrandizing position on his grandmother, the extravagant claims of lines five and six convincing us, because of this skilful ordering. Or *almost* convincing us, perhaps – even if this is an extravagant rather than realistic perception of Mrs Williams, this is of course understandable in the eyes of a loving grandchild.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 7-14.

Line seven again shows us the poet's skill in impactfully inverting sentence structures. The line is in some ways an inversion of line one: it communicates much of the same information. Now, though, it is not **'Mrs Williams'** who is defined by being **'next door to Zion,'** but rather **'Zion'** which is defined by being **'next door to her house.'** The power dynamic and the importance of Mrs Williams has now changed, justified by the praise the speaker has given her in lines 4-6.

Lines 9-11 show that Mrs Williams in the poem is not just herself; she points towards social change and the shrinking importance of the chapel in valleys communities, as the twentieth century moves towards its conclusion. The contrast in the language here shows the author's celebration of how significant chapels were in the past. The description of the past is expressed in celebratory vocabulary, such as **'hail in song'**, and line eight is a perfect iambic pentameter: **'and filled with singing on a Sunday night.'** By contrast, the situation *now* is given to us in much more downbeat vocabulary, in line eleven: **'grey stone building.'** This line is also much more metrically awkward: **'when Zion was more than the name of a grey stone building.'**

Line twelve returns us to the content of lines one and seven, reminding us that Mrs Williams lived next door to Zion, deepening the sense of this repetition being used as a structural device. Rees repeatedly gives us the simplistic community view of Mrs Williams, reducing her to where she lived, in order to drive forward the ways he can problematise this, expounding instead the real complexity of her life. This time, it is used to introduce the grandmother's final tragedy, as described in lines 13-14: **'when the final illness came it seemed / the singing filled her house, and she was glad.'** Again, as with lines 5-6, there's a willingness here to romanticise the grandmother and her experience, for the poem to present ideas and language which are worthy of her, and all of this is understandable, given that the poem is in the voice of a loving grandchild. Lines thirteen to fourteen are written in pretty much perfect iambic pentameter, giving us an elevation of language at the point of discussing the death: **'and when the final illness came it seemed / the singing filled her house, and she was glad.'** The notion that the singing from the chapel **'filled her house'** at the point of death is a romantic and elevated way of describing the **'final illness,'** or rather the escape from it to the memory of or imagined singing, and the comfort that offers, leading us effectively to the poem's conclusion.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

It might be worth considering the way in which links can be found between Rees's language here and the language of the Bible. Verses 4-6 of Psalm 23, for example, seem to be echoed in Rees's lines:

- ⁴ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:
for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
- ⁵ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest
my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
- ⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell
in the house of the Lord for ever.

Rees's language in these lines then, with their reference to the **'house'** being **'filled,'** seems to suggest that the grandmother is seeking spiritual comfort at the point of death. Similarly, John 8:56 reads 'Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad,' and Rees's language - **'she was glad'** - again seems to echo the Bible, enacting the grandmother's reaching for spiritual comfort at the darkest moment.

Lines 15-18.

Lines 15-17 do a great deal of work in terms of building up to the very last line of the poem, its repetition of the poem's opening line, and guiding us to read it in some rich and interesting ways. Line 15 begins with the word **'And'**, suggesting that the poem's ending will continue in the grand and romantic style of lines 13-14. The expectation is built by line 16, another line which idealises and celebrates Mrs Williams, and which again has a strong relationship to iambic pentameter, to help elevate it. Moreover, line 17 concludes with a colon, setting up the final line to be a fitting culmination of all the celebration of the grandmother which has happened in lines 14-17.

Instead of a celebratory or elegiac line though, the last line gives us a repetition of the poem's first, apparently returning us to the simplistic opinion of Mrs Williams the community held. The repetition is downbeat, the line metrically awkward rather than sonorous, a possible disappointment rather than a culmination of the way we have been led to view Mrs Williams.

There are a number of ways to read this final line. The primary one seems to be that, by re-stating the first line, the poem shows us how far we've travelled in our perception of the grandmother, how problematic and superficial the judgement of **'the neighbours'** at the start now appears, how important the poem now seems. In emphasising how far we've travelled and how much we've come to understand Mrs Williams, the repetition generates real emotion. By the end, the notion that Mrs Williams is **'next door to Zion'** is more than just a description of where she lives, and is a phrase that is profound as well as prosaic. She is close to Zion, close to the promised land, in the spiritual dimension of her character and almost the holiness the poem has imbued her with.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

While this feels like the primary reading of the poem, a question worth asking is whether the community ever see Mrs Williams's full richness, or whether her full character is seen only by us and the grandchild-speaker. Line three begins '**I can recall,**' and it's difficult to establish, in lines 3-12, direct evidence to suggest that the community is aware of the richness in the way the grandchild is, or that they fully understand the aptness of their judgement of her. '**It is fitting,**' in line 15, then, can mean that the community's judgement of Mrs Williams showed full knowledge of all that she was. But it might be possible to read the judgement as fitting in ways that the community could never understand, which only the speaker and reader can access.

It is at least possible to see this, then, as a poem which contrasts familial understanding of people with the superficial ways in which people in a community know each other and yet don't know each other, however (perhaps accidentally) apt their impressions of each other might be. If this reading is pursued, it can bring an interesting aspect to the poem, because this then becomes a text which doesn't really celebrate the close connections between people in valleys communities, which is what these places are often noted for. Rather, the perception of '**the neighbours**' is seen as remaining superficial, and nowhere near the kind of nuanced love, understanding and celebration that family members are capable of.

The simplification of the neighbours' notions of Mrs Williams can be connected with the way the poem presents the erosion of the chapel as the hub of the community, the way that the chapel has become just '**a grey stone building.**' The grandmother's happiest memories are explicitly connected in the poem with a time when the chapel was a vibrant way of connecting people: '**the singing filled her house, and she was glad.**' Viewed in this way, the poem can be seen to mourn not just Mrs Williams, but a time of closely-connected valleys communities, made close by institutions such as the chapel.

The final line of the poem is therefore rich in ambiguity. The judgement it gives us on Mrs Williams is, as the poem says '**fitting**', in that she is intimately connected to the chapel and the sense of community it embodies – she is close to it in a spiritual as well as physical sense. That word '**fitting**' though can also be seen as ironic, and this has two impacts. If the final line does not follow from the nuanced celebration of Mrs Williams in the poem, the emotional impact of her death is brought home to us, by the gap between how the poem views her and how the final line does. The final line can also be seen as satirising the notion of close communities, suggesting that only familial connections really generate close relationships between people.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The richness of this last line, the way it points in several directions and, therefore, the reader's uncertainty in quite how to take it, is enacted by the distant half-rhyme of '**woman**' at the end of line 15 and '**Zion**' at the end of line 18. The half-rhyme further undermines the authority of the last line, leaving us on a moment of doubt. Yes, the woman and the chapel were physically close throughout her life, but that sonic awkwardness of the half-rhyme undermines the power of the last line's judgement on her, showing us, as the poem has, that there was so very much more.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'My Mother's Mother' is a poem of accessible language, in keeping with its intention of celebrating an 'ordinary person,' but it is rich and ambiguous in meaning. It is, firstly, a moving elegy for the speaker's grandmother, idealising her and expressing the grandchild's love for her: **'no sun shone /without the gift of her rare happiness.'** In her last days, we are told, **'when the final illness came it seemed / the singing filled her house,'** suggesting her spiritual connection with the chapel and the singers whom she seems to hear in her last days. The poem unpacks the resonance of an apparently superficial first line to show the significance of living next to Zion: Mrs Williams is spiritually reaching out towards the promised land through her religion, as well as dwelling next door to a building named Zion. In order to celebrate the grandmother, the poem pits the grandchild's nuanced understanding and idealised vision of her, against the superficial vision **'the neighbours'** seem to have of her, at least at the opening of the poem. The limitations of the neighbours' understanding enhance by contrast the depth of the speaker's love, creating a moving elegy. Familial connections matter, the poem seems to say, and to say this, it presents community connections, at least in the poem's opening, as shallow.

This sense of the poem is also connected to how it presents the Zion chapel. The chapel is presented as a place that was a community hub in the past. By connecting the grandmother with the chapel throughout the poem, her death can be seen as symbolic of the erosion of the position of the chapel at the heart of valleys communities, and the erosion of the strong connectedness of these communities, as the twentieth century draws to its end.

This reading of the poem as mourning the change in valleys communities which Mrs Williams has witnessed during her lifetime is problematised by one thing. The first and last lines of the poem, which are exposed as showing a limited understanding of Mrs Williams, are expressed in the voice of a quite old-fashioned community: **'Mrs Williams the fish-shop, next door to Zion.'** A question which is worth asking then is whether, rather than showing us that connectedness in valleys communities is dying in the latter half of the twentieth century, the poem is actually suggesting that such connectedness was never that strong at all. Certainly, it is not seen in the poem as anywhere near as strong as familial ties.

All of this is interesting in terms of Alun Rees's wider socialist poetry project. In its celebration of an 'ordinary' life, its willingness to make the subject of a poem out of the sort of person that poetry often ignores, 'My Mother's Mother' can be considered a left-wing poem. Yet in its celebration of religion, its nostalgia for a time when the chapel was **'filled with singing'**, and in its questioning of the extent of community ties in the south Wales valleys, the poem shows that, while Rees may have a wider socialist project, he is not in any way a one-note or predictable writer.

FIVE QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

- How does the writer make this poem a moving elegy for a grandmother?
- How does the poet want us to read the final line?
- How do you think the grandmother might feel about this poem if she could read it?
- What opinion does the poem have of religion, and of the community in which Mrs Williams lived?
- Do you recognise the community Alun Rees describes in his poem? Do you feel community connections between people are stronger or weaker now than those Rees describes? Can you imagine or recall ways in which people are named in relation to jobs, places or landmarks?

PHOTOGRAPHS



Photo by permission of Alun Rees.

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

The poet's website, Taffy is a Welshman - The poetry of Alun Rees: poetalunwilliamrees.wordpress.com

An appreciative biography of the poet is available from the Red Poets website: redpoets.org/alun-rees.html

Reviews of Rees's collection *Yesterday's Tomorrow*:

socialismtoday.org/archive/94/poetry.html

poetryparc.wordpress.com/tag/alun-rees

Information about the Red Poets group, Red Poets - A History - Welsh Poetry Competition:

welshpoetry.co.uk/red-poets-a-history

Jonathan Edwards

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John Pook

'In Chapel'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

John Pook was born in 1942. He grew up in the small community of Gowerton near Swansea. As a child, he attended Gowerton Boys Grammar School.

As a young adult, he attended Queen’s College, Cambridge, to study English. Later, he studied Linguistics at the University of North Wales in Bangor. Having trained as an English teacher, Pook has also worked as an editor and translator. He spent time working for an airline reservation company which eventually led him to leave Wales and move to the south of France.

(A brief biography is available in the Library of Wales anthology *Poetry 1900–2000*, ed. Meic Stephens.)

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The title of the poem is direct and establishes the scene for the poem, which takes place in a chapel. Although very little further detail is offered by the title, it is worth noting the use of the term '**chapel**', a word used for a place of worship which has no fixed pastor and no permanent congregation. In this way, the chapel differs from a church, which would usually have both a fixed pastor or priest, as well as a permanent congregation. Ironically, the lack of permanency associated with a chapel is at odds with the apparent centrality of the chapel in the life of the poet's mother.

Form.

The poem has been divided into lines of similar length and rhythm, with the stanzas replicating this structure. While each of the stanzas is form of a quatrain, the poem resists the rhyming scheme of a ballad, but its organised structure may recall, and perhaps even satirise, the format adopted by many hymns and prayers. There is relatively little punctuation in the first four stanzas of the poem, with each stanza notably ending mid-sentence and that sentence continuing in the first line of the following stanza. This structure perhaps suggests a continuity of both the chapel and the faith it has upheld across the years. In contrast, the final stanza starts with a new sentence and is therefore set apart from the others by this enforced pause between sentences.

Lines 1-8.

The poem opens with a description of a child entering a chapel, specifically the vestry schoolroom. The level of detail included in the opening lines suggest that the speaker has been a frequent visitor. These first lines of the poem which are in the present tense make it difficult to discern if this scene is unfolding in the present of the poem or in a memory recalled from the past. The recollection of the '**vestry schoolroom**' implies that this is a place in which the speaker has attended Sunday School at some stage of his life, seemingly confirmed by the confession that this was a place where '**we kept / The faith and flirted with the girls**'.

As the poem moves into the second stanza, we infer that the speaker is returning to this chapel as an adult, noting that '**though everything has changed**' things within the building remain '**exactly as it was**'. This reflection implies that the chapel has remained unchanged while the speaker himself has grown and developed from the person he was when he attended as a child. Nevertheless, the description of the smell '**of flowers, polished wood**' suggests that there is something slightly stagnant about the chapel. While it may be clean and stocked with fresh flowers, the chapel remains unaffected and shielded from the wider world, even '**the smells**' remain the same and invoke memories for the speaker. The lines in these two stanzas flow easily together, with very little punctuation between them, reflecting the ease with which the speaker finds himself drawn back into his memories of his time spent within the chapel as a child.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 9-16.

In these lines the speaker offers us a little more detail about the chapel. He describes the mop which rests **'behind the piano in the corner'**, which further reveals his familiarity with the building and its mundane rather than spiritual attributes, perhaps representing the (gendered?) labour that goes on behind the scenes. The description of **'the heavy Bible resting on the lectern'** is an interesting image, for the reason it depicts faith as a weight which is being held up by the stand from which the minister will deliver a sermon each week. In this image the Bible itself takes on additional significance, becoming a physical symbol for upholding the faith and conveying the Christian message within it. The weight of the Bible also suggests that the speaker regards the message contained within as a heavy burden which has the potential to be oppressive.

It is in the third and fourth stanzas that the speaker finally reveals the primary reason he is in the chapel. He explains that he is with his mother as she **'comes with dahlias, daffodils,'** to place in the chapel to fulfil **'her turn // On "Flower Rota"'**. The combination of flowers referenced by the speaker here is interesting as **'dahlias'** and **'daffodils'** do not usually bloom at the same time, suggesting that there is something artificial about the arrangement. Moreover, the **'Flower Rota'** itself is significant as it is capitalised and placed in inverted commas, which suggests a sense of mock gravitas and, perhaps, sarcasm from the speaker. He refers to the rota as something which is clearly carefully adhered to by his mother and **'its faces flip my mind'** alludes to the document which records the rota. The speaker considers this rota while his mother **'spends some time arranging flowers'** and, as he does so, recalls the names of the people whose **'faces flip'** in his mind. The reference to it being **'two decades'** indicates that it has been some considerable time since the speaker was last in the chapel and yet he is still able to find much with which he is familiar, further cementing the idea that the chapel (and what it represents) has changed very little in the time since his last visit. Tellingly, the speaker's own distance from the chapel is in sharp contrast with his mother's connection to the chapel as she spends her Saturday evening preparing the flowers ready for the service on Sunday.

The distance which exists between the speaker and his mother may also be reflective of a generational tension which undercuts the poem. While the image of his mother arranging flowers appears to be quite a peaceful one, the speaker's own time within the chapel is filled with tension. The recollection of faces which **'flip'** as he considers the **'Flower Rota'** suggests that the speaker is challenged or confronted by the memory of the names. Likewise, the twenty years which have passed since he was in the chapel are in stark contrast with his mother's frequent visits to the building and her involvement in its work. The mother/son relationship is subsequently one which epitomises the tension which exists between not only two different generations but between differing ways of life.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 17-20.

The final stanza of the poem stands apart from the others. For instance, the stanza is separated by the start of a new sentence and divided by more punctuation than in the previous stanzas. Here the speaker uses the depiction of his mother filling the jar for the flowers with water to reflect on the passing of time. His comment of how this happens '**predictably**' attributes a sense of inevitability to the passing of time, reflected in the way the jar slowly '**fills up**' with water.

The atmosphere of inevitability is furthered by the observation that '**tomorrow will see**' his mother worship in the chapel '**as usual**', confirming that the chapel and services remain a pivotal part of his mother's daily life. At this point, the speaker diverges from his mother, drawing the focus of the poem back to himself as he describes himself as '**beer-dry**' while thinking of '**the cup**' his mother will drink from tomorrow. The term '**beer-dry**' may also be a reference to the Temperance movement within non-conformity, which was founded on the idea of promoting abstinence among members. The image of drinking may also be used here as a reference to the cup drunk from by the congregation during the communion service. In addition, the image is indicative of the rituals which take place within the chapel each week, many of which have non-spiritual manifestations. The cleaning rituals, the familiarity of flirting during Sunday School and preparing flowers on the Saturday evening are all examples of non-religious routines which the speaker clearly associates with the chapel. Despite the familiarity of the building and these rituals, the speaker's closing statement of '**I shall be elsewhere**' has a combative feel, as if he is making clear his distance from the chapel and his movement away from the faith of his childhood. It remains unclear whether the speaker intends to go straight from the chapel to the pub, or whether he is simply expressing resentment about spending his Saturday night in a chapel with his mother. Either way, it is worth noting that the Sunday Licensing law, which required pubs in Wales to close on a Sunday and were repealed in 1961, was the first legal act which recognised Wales as a distinct nation.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'In Chapel' takes an ordinary, domestic task in the form of arranging flowers ahead of a religious service and uses it to explore the speaker's feelings. As he returns to a chapel he attended as a child, the speaker becomes aware of how strongly the chapel is still engrained within the life of his mother. There is nothing remarkable about this trip to the chapel where the speaker must wait while his mother arranges flowers for the next day's service. Yet, it is within the simplicity of watching his mother's routine that the speaker finds an opportunity to reflect on what the building used to mean to him. It is noticeable that the focus here was as much on the social interaction and 'flirt[ing]' which took place in the building as it was on the faith. Moreover, as the speaker returns to the chapel and looks around it, the emphasis is on the past and his previous experience in the chapel. This evidences that he does not feel a lasting connection with the building or the Christian faith.

Routine and ritual play a significant part in this poem, perhaps reflected by the structure of the poem (which is arranged into five stanzas, each of four lines in length). There are a number of lines in the poem which almost rhyme on alternating lines, but differ slightly from each other, while other alternating lines offer up a more conventional rhyme. This is evident in the third and fifth stanzas, which contain the rhymes 'lectern' and 'turn', and 'up' and 'cup'. The way in which these rhymes reoccur furthers the sense of inevitability about the mother's routine in arranging the flowers. The overall effect is a poem which offers a gentle rhythm which ebbs and flows in a style which seems to reflect the predictability of routine and the passage of time. This approach is in keeping with much of Pook's other poetry, which often adopts a reflective tone, drawing on familiar places or items to explore the past and our connection to it.

The gentle tone of the poem belies the undertone of rebellion which breaks through in the speaker's attitude as the poem draws to a close. Having started out 'follow[ing]' his mother into the chapel in the first stanza, by the end of the poem the speaker is keen to assert his own identity separating his own life from that of his mother. This sense of detachment which the speaker feels from his mother may also have a wider meaning. The figure of a mother is often used to represent the domestic sphere and a sense of nationhood within Wales; the speaker may, therefore, be displaying his own detachment from his childhood identity, the home and its way of life, which his mother represents.¹ What is evident throughout the poem is that while the chapel is a place which is still integral to his mother's identity, it is only now connected to the speaker as a piece of his past. As such, the poem speaks to the nature of identity and the way in which the parent/child relationship has diverged as the speaker has grown and built his own life. This life has extended beyond the influence of his mother and the insular security of the chapel. While the chapel and his mother continue as they have always done, it is clear that they are primarily representative of the speaker's past, and for this reason are no longer as central to his current life.

(1) Deidre Beddoe discusses the concept of the archetypal 'Welsh Mam' and the presentation of the Welsh mother as 'hardworking, pious and clean, a mother to her sons and responsible for the home'. This representation in Welsh literature is common. See Deidre Beddoe, 'Images of Welsh Women' in *Wales: The Imagined Nation* ed. Tony Curtis (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1986) pp. 227-238.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

- Look again at the alliteration used in the poem; what effect does this have?
- How does the speaker use his description of the chapel to convey a sense of familiarity with the building and its contents?
- How is the speaker's mother portrayed in the poem?
- Consider the use of pronouns in the poem. In what ways are they significant?

Dr Emma Schofield

Cardiff University

June 2021



We are grateful for the financial support of Swansea University, The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh Writing in English.

Tony Curtis

'To My Father'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Tony Curtis was born in Carmarthen in 1946 and spent his teenage years in Pembrokeshire. Having studied at both Vermont University and Swansea University, Curtis later went on to join the University of South Wales, where he continues to work as an Emeritus Professor of English and Creative Writing. On a personal level, Curtis experienced a tumultuous relationship with his own father, a subject broached in a number of his poems and arising from a feeling that his father had deliberately concealed details of his life from Curtis and their wider family. These details centred on his father’s reticence regarding his work during World War Two, which was a cause of some considerable frustration to Curtis.¹

During his career as a poet, Curtis has won numerous awards for his work, including the Eric Gregory Award in 1972 and the National Poetry Competition in 1984. His poetry to date has tended to address subjects including identity, family, the landscape of Wales and the impact of war in a domestic environment. In 2017 Curtis published his first collection of short stories, a volume entitled *Some Kind of Immortality*, a collection which drew together some of his short fiction from across his lengthy career.

Curtis has written and edited several volumes of criticism, including books on fellow Welsh author Dannie Abse as well as extensive work on the poet Dylan Thomas. Curtis’s work, both creative and academic, has been widely acclaimed. Critic Meic Stephens reflected on how his poetry is ‘technically versatile, its imagery precise’ when summarising the impact of Curtis’s writing.²

(A brief biography is available in the Library of Wales anthology *Poetry 1900–2000*, ed. Meic Stephens.)

(1) Tony Curtis reflected on the difficult relationship with his father in a 2017 essay for *The Lonely Crowd*.

Tony Curtis, ‘What did you do in the War, Dad?’, *The Lonely Crowd*, 2017.

thelonelycrowd.org/2017/10/14/what-did-you-do-in-the-war-dad-tony-curtis

(2) Meic Stephens, *The New Companion to the Literature of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), p.62.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The title speaks directly to the poem's subject: the speaker's father. This frames the poem as a direct message to the father. Furthermore, the use of direct language is mirrored by the poem's content as well as the question aimed at the father. Moreover, the fact that the poem's title addresses the speaker's father in this way (as '**my father**') immediately indicates that the poem will have a personal focus for the speaker.

Form.

There is a pace to the poem which seems to gather momentum as the stanzas unfold. However, there is no formal structure to the poem. For this reason, the changing pattern of shorter and longer sentences can be seen to reflect the rapidly shifting shape of the speaker's thoughts. The reflective tone of the poem is particularly noticeable when read aloud, with the speaker punctuating his childhood memories with his father as questions which seek to challenge why the father was not more willing to communicate with his son. Curtis does this by drawing on the passing down of memories and skills which would have created a long-lasting connection. During these reflections the speaker's sentences tend to be much shorter, cutting straight to the point and with a strong focus on the needs of the speaker, as can be noted in his assertion that '**I wanted timing**' and '**I wanted you to teach me**'. Towards the end of the poem there is a return to longer sentences, as the speaker slides back into his thoughts and moves away from the interrogative tone which distinguishes the middle stanzas of the poem from the opening and closing verses.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-12.

The opening lines of the poem have an accusatory tone, with the emphasis being on the fact that the skill of bellringing is **'another'** thing that the poet's father has not taught him. This opening statement instantly tells the reader that the speaker believes there are other skills which his father should have passed on to him. Furthermore, the primary source of tension in this poem is the struggle between father and son. Indeed, a paternal relationship is one of the key themes in the poem which is introduced early in the opening lines. In this way, readers are placed in the middle of a conflict which has been going on for a long time. There is a clear sense of resentment, especially in the assertion that **'you didn't teach me'**, a phrase which lays blame on the father figure and implies that he has failed in his parental duty. The poet recalls time spent in the cathedral as a child, drawing on sensory memories to depict his experience of the time spent with his father in belfries. The speaker describes the smell of the **'years in the wood beams'**, an image which serves a twofold purpose, suggesting the age of the building, as well as indicating that the speaker has spent a considerable portion of time in such places. The tone continues to be hostile in this section, with the poet phrasing his words as questions in a manner which seems designed to challenge his father.

The cathedral makes for a suggestive setting for these memories, with the **'crooked ladders'**, **'musty smell'** and **'jammed trapdoors'** mirroring the broken relationship between the speaker and his father. Even the movement of the bells which **'move / against a man's pull'** suggests parting rather than togetherness. There is a sinister undertone about the way the poet describes hearing the stories told by others of a noise which is **'deafening'** and **'draws blood'**, lending the stanza an uneasy feel.

To continue, the speaker describes a time where his father once rang the bells for the Queen. Despite the language used in the poem giving us a sense of occasion or **'pomp'**, the child is shown as feeling isolated when watching what should be a notable moment in their relationship. Here, the statement **'and I watched'** sits on a line of its own. This language emphasises the isolation the speaker felt as a child, as he watched his father ring the bells. For this reason, the speaker regards himself as a spectator reflecting the emotional distance between the poet and his father. This sense of distance is compounded by the **'cold stone'** of the cathedral which absorbs the **'pomp'** of the occasion, so that even the memory of such a special event is not able to placate the sense of resentment and frustration the poet feels towards his father. Furthermore, the cold stone represents the father's lack of emotional presence in the speaker's life. The fact that the speaker describes the **'pomp'** as being able to **'ooze'** into the cold stone invokes a sense of embodiment, suggesting that the splendour and ceremony of the occasion can break through his father's emotional detachment in a way which the speaker cannot.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 13–17.

These lines mark a change in the tone as the focus switches from the speaker's father to the speaker himself. In this section the sentences all begin with the assertion '**I want**', with the speaker focusing firmly on their own needs. In contrast to the coldness of the previous stanza, this section of the poem reflects a much stronger connection between father and son as the speaker claims that he wanted to learn the skill of bellringing, expressing a desire to '**lean my weight**' into the rope. There is a sense of intimacy in the speaker's confession that he '**wanted you to teach me**'. Moreover, this demonstrates an interest in his father's actions and a keenness in the young boy to emulate or find common ground with his father, and perhaps the structure and discipline suggested by the single sentence and line '**I wanted timing.**'

The repetition of the word '**teach**' and its ability to connect multiple generations '**teach me / to teach my son's son**' emphasises the role of the father as guide and the fracture caused by his failure. There is also an implicit suggestion that the speaker's own paternal role has been wanting (he has not been taught the skills to teach his '**son's son**').

This stanza closes with a sentimental tone. With the poet imagining a scenario where the skill of bellringing is passed on from one generation to the next. In this way, the passing down of information connects familial ties as well as strengthens existing bonds between father and son. However, the poem is bittersweet as the enthusiasm of youth is undermined by a father struggling to relate to his son. This final sentence of the stanza contains no punctuation, reflecting the way in which the speaker imagines the continuity of his family line and how a connection might have been passed effortlessly between generations, the implication being that his father is to blame for the fact that this has not happened.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 18-23.

In these lines the tentatively imagined familial bond set out by the poet in the previous stanza is explicitly punctured as the speaker returns to the accusatory tone from earlier in the poem. He blames his father's decision to turn **'your back on that'** for bringing **'our line down'**. The speaker's comment here relates not only to his personal relationship with his father but to what he regards as a form of generational collapse. There is, perhaps, a sense of entitlement here as the speaker expects that a parent should pass on both information and skills to their offspring. When the speaker receives neither of these things from his father, he experiences a sense of frustration that he has been denied and what he regards as his rightful inheritance. As a result of this frustration, there is an anger in the way the speaker addresses his father in this section of the poem. He demands to know **'what have you left me?'** which directly challenges his father's reticence. The question **'what sense of the past?'** hints at a deeper issue, suggesting that the speaker feels he has been left unsatisfied by his father because of his refusal to pass on memories through craft and skills. The sense of disappointment felt so acutely by the speaker also suggests that he regards this loss of connection as the breakdown in the male line of his family, with his father's actions severing the tie between one generation and the next.

In the second half of this stanza the speaker imagines again what might have been, envisaging how **'I could have lost myself'** in the rhythm of the bell ringing. His naming of different types of bells reveals to the reader some learned knowledge. Additionally, the mention of the **'clipped calling'** is a further indicator of a connection between son and father which has been cut short and brought to a halt by the father's decision not to engage fully with his son.

Lines 24-25.

In the final stanza the speaker reflects on the what the sound of the bells means to him now as an adult. The long line slows the pace and adds a melancholy, reflective edge. The line is in the present tense and indicates a different kind of learning **'I know now'**. At this point the speaker describes himself as being **'carrie[d]'** by the sound of the bells, revealing emotion as the sound brings him **'close to tears'** but also suggests the way a child may be carried by an adult suggesting the vulnerability that remains in the man. It is clear the bells represent much more to the poet, including the **'noise of worship and weddings and death'**, which are all milestones in life. However, the poet is aware that these are milestones which have not been shared with the speaker's father. Instead, the speaker is left with only the sound of the bells ringing to fill **'the hollow'** he feels in his throat. Bells are of course themselves hollow structures which, when struck with a clapper, fill with and emit sound. These lines offer a poignant ending to the poem by drawing attention to the void in the relationship between the speaker and his father, and possibly the speaker's inability to articulate this loss (**'the hollow throat'** rather than the speaking voice).

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

This is a complex poem which reflects the speaker's sense of the failures and omissions of his father. The poem is structured around the act of bell ringing and the sound of bells. However, much of the imagery is connected to the body ('**blood**', '**madness**', '**a man's pull**', '**weight**', '**tears**', '**throat**') and with generational connections ('**my father**', '**my son's son**', '**our line**', '**Grandsires**', '**marriage**', '**death**').

The poem opens by depicting at least some unity between the father and son, with the speaker recalling the number of ladders '**we climb[ed]**' and the belfries '**we crouch[ed] in**'. In these lines the speaker and his father appear to be more of a unit, with the emphasis on the shared experience of being in the cathedral and climbing the precarious route to the belltower. From this point on, the two become much more disparate figures; the speaker recounts how '**you rang for the Queen / and I watched**'; the separation between the father's experience of ringing the bells for the Queen and the speaker's experience of watching from the belfry, provide a sharp contrast which is reinforced by the line break.

The poem is one of a number written by Curtis exploring father/son relationships and may well have been influenced by Curtis's own experience with his father, a man with whom he became increasingly frustrated. Curtis addresses this situation in other poems, including 'Pro Patria', where he questions what his father had actually been doing during World War Two. 'To My Father' contains a similar tone of frustration, with the speaker increasingly questioning who his father is and why he has not sought a deeper connection with his son. For the speaker, his father's decision not to teach him how to ring the church bells is a metaphor for a much deeper breakdown in their relationship.

Perhaps as a result of this frustration and anger, the poem has quite a quick pace and seems to gather momentum as it reaches a crescendo in the penultimate stanza. There is relatively little punctuation in the poem but what there is further conveys the speaker's irritation with his father. Short sentences such as '**I wanted timing**' are direct and focus entirely on the needs of the speaker. Similarly, in the penultimate stanza the speaker once again fires questions at his father, demanding to know '**what have you left me?**' and '**what sense of the past?**'. In this way, the speaker effectively lays down a challenge to his father. It is clear from these questions that the speaker feels his father's reticence about his past has had a negative impact on the speaker himself, as well as his wider family. The symbolism of the bells as a metaphor for the father/son relationship returns again in this stanza. Questions are followed by a long sentence in which the speaker reflects on what their relationship may have been like, if his father had been a more communicative figure. For the speaker, a strong connection to the past, together with an understanding of his parents' identity, is clearly an important feature of developing his own sense of identity as he moves through life.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

In the final stanza of the poem there is a sense of acceptance from the speaker as he employs a resigned tone to admit that the sound of church bells still brings him '**close to tears**'. As a result, the speaker suggests that he has not been able to fully move on from the hurt and disappointment caused by his difficult relationship with his father. Moreover, the '**hollow**' feeling in his throat is an indication both of this emotion and also of the void the speaker feels his father has left in his life. The stanza draws the poem to an emotional conclusion which leaves the questions it poses largely unanswered and providing the reader with a taste of the frustration the speaker feels.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

- Why do you think the structure and rhythm varies throughout the poem?
- What effect does the direct address to the father from the speaker have on the mood of the poem?
- What is the significance of bells in the poem?
- What does this poem tell us about expected role of fathers (e.g. as teachers, benefactors, upholders of a family line, historians, nurturers)? What roles does the father enact in the poem?

SECTION 5

PHOTOGRAPHS



Photos available on the poet's website: Album – Tony Curtis (tonycurtispoet.com). The photos on his website depict Curtis at a number of points throughout his career, in addition to attending events related to his work.

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Information, including biographical details, are available on the poet's website: tonycurtispoet.com

Profile of Tony Curtis on the British Council Literature website: literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/tony-curtis

Tony Curtis discusses his relationship with his father, in relation to the poem 'Pro Patria' and his wider writing, in a piece for *The Lonely Crowd* magazine: thelonelycrowd.org/2016/10/18/tony-curtis-the-lonely-crowd-poems



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Sheenagh Pugh

'Toast'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Sheenagh Pugh was born in Birmingham in 1950, took a degree in Modern Languages at Bristol University and lived for many years in Cardiff, where she worked as a civil servant before lecturing in creative writing at the University of Glamorgan. She retired in 2008, and moved to Shetland, where she still lives and writes. Author of two novels and a critical work (about fan fiction), as well as eleven poetry collections, Pugh was – alongside Gillian Clarke among others – one of the first women to earn attention and acclaim for her poetry in Wales.

Partly as a result of this early visibility, her work has been widely anthologised, and appears in most of the significant anthologies produced in or about Wales in the course of her career, including *The Bright Field* (ed. Meic Stephens, Carcanet), *Twentieth Century Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (ed. Dannie Abse, Seren) and *Welsh Women’s Poetry 1460–2001* (ed. Katie Gramich, Honno). Despite this status, Pugh does not encourage her readers to identify her particularly with Wales, although she has written poems which are located there. ‘Toast’ is unusual in its detailing of its location, although in fact Cardiff is used chiefly as frame for, rather than focus of, the poem’s central themes: the passing of time, beauty and desire.

Pugh has been a prolific reviewer for much of her career. Her sometimes trenchant views are revealed in these and other writings, including essays, features and the interviews she has given over the years (for a recent example, see *In Her Own Words: Women Talking Poetry and Wales*, by Alice Entwistle, pp. 135–148). As with the issue of her sense of cultural identity, Pugh has never welcomed being marked out for her gender. She has however given scholars and writers permission to discuss her work in both contexts, as long as they note her reservations.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'**Toast**' appears in Pugh's ninth poetry collection *The Beautiful Lie*, published in 2002. The title is playful, humorously punning on the idea of a toast – a celebratory drink, offered by a gathering of people to honour someone or something, perhaps for a special event or achievement – and the golden crisping effect of intense heat on, say, bread, of course. The poem is thus a 'toast', to the toasting bodies of the sunbathing workmen which the poem's middle-aged and apparently female speaker mischievously savours, and anticipates remembering, with such relish.

Alongside its clever and comic reversal of poetic convention (in which a male speaker describes the frequently erotic attraction of a usually younger, beautiful, and invariably silent woman), the poem offers a poignant meditation on age, aging and memory, as well as desire. Surreptitiously, it studies the ways in which memory, as well as humour, can help to ease and console against the passage of time, and its effects on bodies, places and the self.

Form.

'Toast' is composed entirely of couplets, or two-line stanzas. In some ways this choice of form underlines the doubleness of meaning of the title, and the other kinds of doubling or reversals, both playful and more serious, in which the text is also openly interested. The couplets aren't strictly end-rhyming, in any regular or conventional way; aural echoes between different words through the poem, both at line-ends and elsewhere, help to link different lines and stanzas. This adds to the sense of fluidity in a poem in which only two stanzas end on a full stop. The remainder run on, or 'elide', across the (visual) gaps between them; this technique (also called enjambment) affords the poet the chance to exploit the tension set up between and among different couplets.

For all its apparently relaxed formality, the fifteen stanzas of 'Toast' fall into two main parts, each marked by an end-stopped stanza. The first part is nine stanzas long; the second six. The ratio of lines – 18:12, cancelling down to 3:2 – is reminiscent of the relationship between octave and sestet (4:3) of a conventional sonnet. This does not seem accidental. 'Toast' is haunted by the conventions of the love poem; the poet's handling of the form helps to confirm her not entirely playful interest in the literary traditions in which 'Toast' is rooted.

Lines 1-7.

The poem's first couplets strike the light-hearted note which prevails in the first part of the poem. In conventional fashion, they locate the poem – in the centre of Cardiff – and just as importantly anchor it in time: the '**summer**' preceding the millennial year for which Cardiff's internationally-known Millennium Stadium (now the Principality Stadium) was named and built, in time for the 1999 Rugby World Cup. However the poem's speaker deftly points us into a second time frame with the opening words '**When I'm old...**'.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1 - 7 (continued).

This sounds more like a throwaway remark than it turns out to be. In the first place, it indicates the speaker's intention to retain the events and experiences which the poem rehearses for later use, in memory. By extension this means that the poem's chief theme, transience, and the remorseless effect of time on youth, beauty and confidence, is at work on the reader's consciousness from its start, for all the naivety of a phrase we've surely all used.

The first couplets introduce the events and people the poem celebrates: the **'toast of Cardiff'**. It seems worth pointing out, however, how the architecture of the first three couplets controls reader expectations, before the poem arrives at this gleeful pun. The opening couplet introduces the **'they'**, but teasingly, ends before it qualifies the pronoun. Thus we are lured over the line ending (**'I won't mean'**), to the blunt dismissal of **'the council'**. Which leaves the builders themselves. But, as if to deliberately entertain herself (the speaker is implicitly female, although the poem avoids actually gendering the voice it uses), we move to the anticipated pleasure of (**'hugging'**) the memory of the **'young builders'** sprawling (for tantalised readers, across two lines and a stanza break),

golden and melting on hot pavements, the toast of Cardiff.

The deliberate delay deepens our sense of the enjoyment to be found in replaying the scene (today, of course, two decades old) which the poem celebrates and savours. In this sense, a little like the sunbathing men it describes, the poem seems to **'open'** itself both **'to sun and the judgement / of passing eyes'**; to flaunt its own form with the same careless abandon, and to surprise us out of our expectations.

Lines 7-12.

The unabashed delight which the speaker takes in the sunbathers sprawling on the city's **'hot pavements'**, caused as much by their lack of self-consciousness as their number and beauty, is comic and infectiously entertaining. The idea that the very heart of the city – the busy streets which meet at Cardiff's parish church of **'St John's'** – is anointed, or **'blessed'**, by the **'fit bodies'**, gleefully inverts the convention that church brings spiritual sustenance to people. This summer, it works the other way. Again, there is a sense that like the builders, the speaker refuses the judgement which these perhaps (mildly) shocking views court. However, it is also now that the seriousness which we might have already sensed at work in the text emerges explicitly, as the speaker tilts us into an unapologetically erotic, rather than smutty, depiction of the bodies themselves, taut with youth (**'unripe'**).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 7-12 (continued).

Note how the description itself stretches over both line and stanza breaks, and how the analysis neatly dodges any reproach: their very public self-display confirms that the men themselves are happy to be viewed precisely as the speaker represents them:

**[...] forget
the jokes, these jeans were fuzz stretched tight**

**over unripe peaches. Sex objects,
and happily up for it.**

Lines 12-18.

In these lines, again, the play of humour and seriousness is finely balanced. On the face of it, they invite us to witness the effect of the men's display on the nature of the city itself. Thanks to them, the sexual energy – the attraction of men for women, or as the poem points out, men for men – which daily life here as anywhere embraces, is fetched into the sunlight, as it were. The very streets seem erotically charged, and here again, the traditionally objectifying gaze which man turns on silent desirable woman is inverted, and its controlling power somehow diffused by the pleasure which the attention – figured, gently and generatively, as sunshine – produces:

'When women / sauntered by, whistling, they'd bask / in warm smiles, browning slowly, loving / the light.' In this easy environment, nobody seems to mind (**'It made no odds'**) who enjoys who: **'they never got mad'**. In the warmth of summer, the (**'heady'**) pleasures of youth, beauty, desire and desirousness – **'being young and fancied and in the sun'** – are mutual and contagious. Significantly, the poem ensures that this last point is made on a single line, and for once the sentence ends with the line break, so the stanza is firmly 'end-stopped'.

Lines 19-22.

It is here, recovering the **'now'** from which the speaker has been recollecting 'the summer they built the stadium', that the poem's mood alters, as might happen in the sestet of a conventional sonnet. The shift enables the full emergence of the text's other main theme: time, its passing, and the changes it works on people and places. Sunbathing bodies have been replaced by the **'vast concrete-and-glass mother-ship'** of the building which drew them to the city in the first place. One kind of perhaps 'awkwardly' alien experience has given way to another decidedly more inhuman and less joyous-seeming one (thanks to the **'dark'** which teeters, suggestively, on the end of the eleventh stanza). However, the poem is not yet done with surprising us, as the next stanzas make clear.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 22–28.

The following lines, unfolding the remainder of the sentence which begins **'Westgate's dark'**, reveal that **'dark'** is adjective, not noun; only the **'November rain'** is darkening the roadway. The change wrought by the season and weather masks another, more deeply buried, and less bleak: the heat and youth of the workmen's bodies seem to have imprinted themselves on the city's very substance.

The comparison with **'sand'** doesn't only – again – bring the beach (thus, once more, the vanished summer) to the cityspace; the simile also picks up on the time-related diction and imagery threading through the poem as a whole. This touches the image with irony: sand is a popular marker for the passage of time (think of egg-timers), decay and the transience of human life. Something of those young men's beauty, and the pleasure they brought to the summer months, remains figured in the **'shallow cups'** of Cardiff's (**'now'**) damp pavements, and etched on the unexpectedly personified **'empty auction house'**, its **'grey façade'** and **'boarded windows'** seeming more than coincidentally elderly, lonely and unsatisfied.

Lines 29–30.

The poem's final, neatly controlled couplet imagines that, like the speaker (apparently anticipating her own elderliness and loneliness), the building revisits a memorable summer less with nostalgia or self-pity, than to resavour its bliss. The legacy of the vanished summer – **'sweat, sunblock, confidence'** (the unromantic language of this conclusion might come as a last surprise) – seems some consolation if not compensation for the passage of time and the pitiless effects of aging.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

In a short piece about herself which you can find on her website, Sheenagh Pugh remarks 'I like to use poems to commemorate people and places, sometimes to amuse, to have a go at things I don't like (censorship, intolerance, pomposity) and above all to entertain'.

<http://sheenagh.wixsite.com/sheenaghpugh/aboutme>

As the reading above is intended to indicate, 'Toast' can be said to do most of these things: it commemorates not only the building of what is currently called the Principality Stadium, but the workforce whose labours made this 'mother-ship' the landmark structure and focus for Wales' capital city it has become. Pugh has herself described the poem as a 'celebration' of the summer it describes, which happened to be a particularly hot one, 'and the way people felt'. But 'Toast' also amuses, and might justifiably be said 'to have a go at' certain kinds of 'intolerance' and (in its casual, even slangy words and phrasing), the kind of self-consciously 'poetic' language and mannerisms which can seem 'pompous' to some readers.

Technically, the poem can be called a dramatic monologue, partly because it uses the first-person 'I' (although there are elements traditionally associated with this form of monologue which this text doesn't observe: identifying its speaker, for example). Like most poets, Pugh positively discourages readers from assuming that the voice of one of her poems is actually *hers*. She warns students who are studying her work: 'Above all, don't suppose that "I" is necessarily the poet. Poets have a saying, "I is a lie", and it's often true. Writing in the first person doesn't mean you are writing of your own personal experience. Poets make things up; it's our job.'

<http://sheenagh.wixsite.com/sheenaghpugh/exam-resources>

That said, it is well worth paying attention to the ways in which the voice and diction of 'Toast' help to direct and influence the way the text works, and affect the reader. Note firstly, for example, how the palette of images weaving through the text is (unobtrusively but tightly) restricted to words or expressions associated with youth, age and/or the passage of time: **'forget', 'unripe', 'browning slowly', 'clock', 'sand', 'grey'...**

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE CONTINUED

In its interest in time, and linking of this with bodies, youth, beauty and desire, this poem openly and deliberately converses with its own long literary history: the 'lyric poem' has been used to examine and celebrate love, its causes and effects, and to lament or disclaim the deleterious passage of time on the human body, from the very first. From this perspective Pugh is doing nothing very different from those astonishing sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers who made this habit so much a part of what scholars still call the 'English' poetry tradition: Wyatt, Shakespeare, Donne, Marvell and their peers. The humorous stance and flavour of this text might seem surprising, but even a casual reading of Shakespeare's sonnets, for example, and certainly Donne will rapidly confirm that humour, sometimes in the rather obvious form of (often saucy) puns, but also irony, sardony and satire, play an important part in the courtly romance traditions which these writers drew from medieval European literature and made their own.

One way in which Pugh rings the changes on that literary history is her choice of the couplet, rather than sonnet, for her poem, even if in doing so she is careful to retain some of the sonnet's architectural balancing of scene-setting and reflection as outlined above. More seriously and significantly, Pugh's poem also discreetly upends two central habits of that same long-lived tradition. Firstly she turns the poem's gaze on the young men it celebrates. In doing so, 'Toast', as suggested, dismisses many centuries of writing in which the speaker's gaze is male, and directed, whether in tender devotion or lust, at the usually young, often unavailable, and invariably silent woman he has chosen as object of and for his desire. This swipe at literary convention mischievously reverses the gender power relations the tradition presumes on, and seems part and parcel of the poem's serious/comic intentions overall. That said, the sun-worshipping workmen are still mute, and to some extent thus silently objectified by the unashamedly desirous gaze of the speaker, as well as other shoppers who **'sauntered by, whistling'**, male and female. However, it is hard to argue with the speaker's conclusion that the workmen welcome the attention (**'happily up for it'**), given the lack of self-consciousness in their self-display. After all, those who didn't want to be constructed as **'Sex objects'** were presumably eating their lunches, clothed, somewhere less visible. In allowing us to evaluate the scene for ourselves, Pugh ensures that her speaker avoids exploiting the objectifying power of the (usually male) gaze which male poets have long presumed on, and implicitly thumbs her nose at that - again long-lived - convention.

Pugh's work (and specifically 'Toast') is discussed from a variety of perspectives in *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry* (by Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle, Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 248-249. Her inclination to write in ways which take her, and a wide range of poetic personae of both genders, out of familiar or recognisable surroundings is examined at more length in *Poetry, Geography, Gender: Women Writing Contemporary Wales* (Alice Entwistle, University of Wales Press, 2013), pp. 137-142.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Why do you think the poet decided to write 'Toast'? Can you explain and justify your answer?

Do you find this poem funny? When/where and why?

How does 'Toast' ask us to view the voice it places centre stage? With sympathy or disapproval? Why have you reached this conclusion? Does it matter?

What do you find surprising or unexpected about this poem? Why? To what extent and in what ways do the qualities or features you have chosen seem significant to its key themes?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5

(link active September 2018)

All links are clickable

An image of Sheenagh Pugh on the Poetry Archive website, taken by Caroline Forbes.

• <https://www.poetryarchive.org/sites/default/files/styles/220x170-live-recordings-block/public/Sheenagh%20Pugh.jpg?itok=hayEiiMz>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

For information about her poems uploaded by the poet, visit her website:

<http://sheenagh.wixsite.com/sheenaghpugh>

She manages two other websites:

<https://sheenaghpugh.livejournal.com/>

<https://sheenagh.webs.com/>

<http://resource.download.wjec.co.uk.s3.amazonaws.com/vtc/2015-16/PoetryInWales2017/Clips/Toast-commentary.mp4>

All links are clickable

**PROFESSOR ALICE
ENTWISTLE**

*University of South Wales
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Robert Minhinnick

'After a Friendship'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Robert Minhinnick (b. 1952) was born in Neath but grew up in Maesteg and Pen-y-fai near Bridgend. He read English at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth and University College, Cardiff. He came to prominence as a poet in the late 1970s, with the publication of two collections in quick succession, *A Thread in the Maze* (1978) and *Native Ground* (1979). He has since published some ten collections of poetry, along with well-received collections of essays and three novels. He is the recipient of numerous literary awards, including the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem (twice, 1999 and 2003) and the Wales Book of the Year (three times, 1999, 2003 and 2006). Alongside his writing, he is an environmental campaigner. He co-founded Friends of the Earth Cymru in 1984 and Sustainable Wales. He was the editor of *Poetry Wales* magazine from 1997 to 2008.

The years in which Minhinnick began writing and publishing were a turbulent time for Welsh society. Since the 1960s, Wales as it had been known – a land of, primarily, coalmining and agriculture – had been changing. By the late 1970s Wales was in the throes of a slow but steady process of deindustrialisation. A society whose economy had once depended almost entirely on the ravaging of natural resources was fast becoming aware of the toll this extraction had taken on the landscape and environment. Much of Minhinnick’s early poetry registers this shift and displays a sensitivity to the industrial past and its place in shaping the present environment: his first collection, *A Thread in the Maze* is full of images of the detritus of former industrial vigour: ‘Old ships lie out in rust-coloured lagoons [...] Their rudimentary structures/Like the skeletons of dinosaurs’ (‘Old Ships’). These poems are rooted in a sense of place and a lived past. ‘After a Friendship’ can be read alongside these in its recollection of a lost childhood friendship. Once asked whether the exploration of childhood and the past was important to him as a poet, Minhinnick answered ‘Yes, it is. Perhaps it derives from the simple fact that I live not far from the place where I was brought up, so that I’m close to my childhood in terms of distance if not time.’

(1) Sam Adams, ‘Interview with Robert Minhinnick: ROBERT MINHINNICK IN CONVERSATION’, *Carcenet*, 2000, carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showdoc=14;doctype=interview

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

However, what remains for Minhinnick after the weighty Welsh past recedes is not a narrow nostalgia or sentimental sense of place but a broadening awareness of the vigorous processes of the natural environment. 'I am interested in the environment and I've looked at it closely and learned to love it and to fear it, to be disgusted by it and to be inspired by it.'² This extends not only to the natural world and its rich, colourful symbolism, which is abundant in Minhinnick's writing – 'scarlet honeycomb'; 'jewels / Of the pomegranate'; 'the creeping flower [...] / Scattered everywhere like confetti' ('Native Ground') – but also inwardly, to an intimate awareness of the biological processes of the body and its interactions with nature: 'I sweat / Listening to my blood's journey, / The thin blue pulse that throbs above the eye' ('In Class').

Moreover, Minhinnick's concern with the natural world extends outwards, beyond the body and the locality in which he lives, to the globe. His poetry evidences an interest in international issues which connect to changes taking place within Wales. In particular, travel is a consistent and energising theme in much of Minhinnick's poetry and prose, with collections such as *Watching the fire-eater* (1992) and *Badlands* (1996) drawing extensively on his travels. Minhinnick himself has disputed the idea of himself as a travel writer, documenting 'other' places – rather he views these books as being 'about Wales viewed from other, strange parts of the world.'³ The broad effect is a body of work that is profoundly attuned to the organic forces that drive both the natural world and us; one that places humans not at the epistemological centre of the universe but as participants caught up in the biological processes of time and the lived environment. In his own words, he is 'interested in a universe which is teeming and is indefinable, and trying to reflect on our part in it.'⁴

(2) Ibid.

(3) Ibid.

(4) Ibid.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'After a Friendship' is a poem about childhood friendships – how profoundly important these are for childhood development and maturity, but also how transient they can be, and how easily lost. It explores the ways in which early friendships, while often brief, are unique, and resonate with us throughout our lives, acquiring new meaning as we develop and mature as adolescents and, later, as we reflect on them as adults. This is, then, a poem about the grief of losing a friend, and the unavoidable passing of time, but also the significance of learning to value lost friendships and relationships. Moreover, this understated, emotionally restrained title captures one of the poem's key themes: the reticence of childhood friendships, where profound feelings are so often unspoken, and instead expressed through actions.

Form.

Minhinnick employs the ballad form in this poem. The ballad is a traditional, folk verse form: four lines per stanza, with a repeating, songlike rhythm and rhyme scheme. They were traditionally oral in inception, sung by the working class both as entertainment and as a means to convey dramatic, comic or heroic stories about history and popular memory. However, in the case of 'After a Friendship', the use of the ballad form is deceptive. Modern poets often use traditional forms to experiment with poetic technique and to reflect playfully on literary form and convention. This poem is an excellent example of this; Minhinnick ingeniously employs the ballad form to reflect on the tension between the perceived simplicity of young friendships and their emotional depth – the ways they contribute to the '**great / Discovery of ourselves**' (Lines 27–28).

While the poem does employ rhyme and half-rhyme throughout, unlike the traditional ballad, the rhythm is deliberately staggered and syncopated. Some lines and stanzas flow freely into one another (enjambment), while others break off suddenly, with caesuras interrupting the flow mid-line – as though mimicking the irregular rhythms of life itself. Further significance about the use of the ballad in this poem is the fact that this was, traditionally, a form designed to be easily memorable, yet this is a poem that reflects on the strange paradox and contradictoriness of memory – the ways it can make the distant past feel visceral and immediate, while also changing and altering organically with time and experience.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-4.

The poem begins rather abruptly with the noun phrase, **'Still clear'** (line 1). This gives the first sentence of the poem a colloquial syntax, as though the memory has startled the speaker into recollection. The phrase also allows for a clever multiplicity of meaning. Strong memories are often described as **'clear'** but the phrase could similarly mean that the weather that morning was **'clear'**. If we take the latter to be true, then the phrase **'still clear'** also implies a sense of continuity between past and present – the idea that the **'clear [...] morning'** all those years ago is still **'clear'** today. This further sets up a conceptual tension that is key to the meaning of the poem: the tension between the deceptive clarity of recollection and the complexity of what a memory can mean or symbolise as time passes.

Pursuing the idea of the immediacy of the memory, this first sentence is spoken using the present participle – **'The lorry carrying furniture'** (line 2). The lack of a primary verb (is/was **'carrying'**) creates ambiguity about the aspect/timing of the event. In the speaker's mind, with the immediacy of recollection, this is happening as he speaks: past and present are interwoven through memory, and this is conveyed through the use of the language of the present tense. The caesura (commonly known as a pause in the middle of a line or a break between words within a metrical foot, here represented by a full stop) after **'Swansea'** (line 3) brilliantly conveys a sense of finality and disconnection: this is the beginning of the end of the speaker's friendship. The stanza concludes with a poignant image of a young boy staring out at his departing friend, close enough to the glass that his breath creates condensation on the window of the **'empty house'** (line 5). The speaker now recalls that he **'never waved'** (line 3). The use of the past participle here (**'waved'**) perhaps implies that he is now, in the present, able to reflect back on his actions as a young boy: perhaps he was, at the time, paralysed by grief, or lacking the emotional maturity to see **'clear[ly]'** (metaphorically, as well as literally through the **'window'** clouded by his breath [line 4]) what was happening and what a change this would make in his life.

Lines 5-12.

The final line of the first stanza runs over into the second, a use of enjambment that conveys a sense of the strange continuity of memory, and the way it connects the past with the present: here the vividness of the speaker's sense of the **'sweet-stale / Air of the empty house'** continues into his recollections as an adult of the event.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The next two stanzas convey the young speaker's sense of loss. Again, a tension is produced between the specifics of what the speaker is able to recall and the depth of feeling, or what these memories symbolise. There is a studied matter-of-factness about these stanzas, beginning with the understated drama of the lines **'If there was grief I have forgotten it, / But from then on things were not the same.'** (lines 6-7). The iambic cadence of these lines, followed by the end stop that closes the latter line, stands out in a poem that contains so much flowing enjambment, and more firmly emphasises the sense of finality. Indeed, what the lines that follow convey is a sense of absence and emptiness, of things **'not [being] the same'**, and of a sense of grief that cannot be remembered, but which leaves its outline in the banality of day-to-day life: **'Grammar-school, homework, rugby-kit / Filled my time'** (lines 8-9). This asyndetic listing of the symbols of school-life offer a sense of time being **'filled'** without joy or enthusiasm.

There is a profound melancholy and isolation in the lines **'I learned to become / Invisible'** (lines 9-10), which again plays with the idea of absence/presence, encouraging readers to reflect on the way that grief can make us feel absent and alienated from others and from ourselves. It also suggests that, alongside his immersion in his formal school learning, the speaker is also learning to become an adolescent/young adult – with all the emotional baggage that comes with a child's fall from innocence. The speaker recalls that he **'wrote the days' timetable / In an exercise book'** (lines 10-11), an image which further conveys the idea of merely filling time with no enthusiasm, as though life is an empty outline, a futile **'exercise'**. Notably, these lines deliberately disrupt the rhythm of the ballad form, using frequent punctuation to give an irregular rhythm, mimicking the irregular, disjointed emotional rhythm of the speaker's sense of loss.

However, stanza three ends with a powerfully evocative image: the **'heart-shaped badge and its black wool / Steamed in the rain'** (lines 12-13). In striking contrast to the prosaic nature of much of the imagery in these two stanzas, this is a visceral, immediate, and multi-textured image: the **'heart-shaped'** badge naturally mirroring the human heart, but also the **'black wool'** hinting at something more vividly animalistic and primal. The fact that the uniform **'steam[s] in the rain'** further suggests a sense of the natural world, of elemental forces at play, in contrast to the banal reality of school life, and foreshadows the appreciation of natural forces later in the poem. Notably, this final phrase flows into the following stanza, which heralds a new phase and shift in mood in the boy's life, as well as in the speaker's recollection of it.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 13-20.

Stanza four contains perhaps the most conventionally poetic phrasing so far: **'And seven years passed like the days' / Seven lessons and he slowly dwindled / From my mind'** (lines 14-16). This lyrical, rhythmic use of language contrasts with the previous two stanzas. These lines are much more in keeping with the conventional ballad form, with a flowing iambic meter and the use of assonance and consonance conveying a softer, almost song-like quality. This is a clear stylistic break from the first three stanzas, indicating a shift in mood or feeling. Here we are given the sense of time rapidly passing – interestingly the idea of **'seven years'** mirrors the folk notion of 'seven years' bad luck', as well as Rudolf Steiner's mystical idea of human life following seven-year cycles.

Once again enjambment is used between stanzas four and five, and here the speedy flow of seven years leads the speaker to a new phase of recollection: no longer caught up in the minutiae of day-to-day life, he acquires a new perspective on the memory of his friend: **'he slowly dwindled / From my mind, a small ghost who preys / Now suddenly but for good reason / On imagination and memory'** (lines 15-18). Indeed, it is notably only here that the boy is finally remembered – earlier in the poem he had only been present as an absence but here the more vivid recollection of the friend begins. The use of the word **'reason'** here is playfully ironic – the **'good reason'** he remembers has nothing to do with conventional logic or reason but with the way emotions and memories work: subtly, elusively, always eluding the full grasp of the intellect. Indeed, the phrase **'imagination and memory'** here makes explicit one of the poem's key themes: the idea that these two things are always connected and intertwined, that memory is never as straightforward as it seems, but, rather, is interconnected and palimpsestic, shifting with time, changing – and changing us – with every new recollection. The full rhyme used in this stanza **'reason [...] season'** is a further play on the palimpsestic nature of memory. From this new, more mature perspective, the speaker is able to look back and see that his **'season / Of friendship'** (lines 19-20) with the boy was **'never repeated'** (line 21), implying that he is now more fully able to appreciate the significance of the bond he had with his friend.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 21-28.

Following the tonal shift of the previous two stanzas, the poem here paints a vivid picture of the speaker's relationship with his friend. The friend is portrayed as an animalistic force of nature, associated with natural imagery: **'mad eyes, a truant, a sleeper-out / In haystacks'** (lines 21-22). In contrast with the empty, anaemic quality of the recollections of school life, these lines are filled with colour, vigour and physicality: **'blood like a grape'** (line 24), **'dust'** (line 24), **'steel and flint'** (line 26). Notably, the only memory of his friend takes the form of a childhood scrap. Here, the conceit rests on the idea that the learning of youth takes place not in school but in the rough-and-tumble of childhood friendship: **'fear and learning'** (a play on Hunter S. Thompson's famous phrase 'fear and loathing'⁵, line 25), where the boys **'sparked each other to the great / Discovery of ourselves'** (lines 27-28). There is violence here, but this is not portrayed with prudishness; rather there is a natural beauty to the image of blood **'like a grape'**, with the implicit connotation of the idea of Willy Russell's *Blood Brothers*⁶. In this way, the rhythm and syntax of these stanzas are jumbled and disorganised, mimicking the physicality of the boys' fight. Moreover, the poem's use of sudden allusions to Thompson and Russell's writings add a chaotic sense of intertextual colour to these violent lines.

Lines 29-32.

Notice the significance of the enjambment that begins the final stanza: **'And went / Our ways'** (lines 28-29) which emphasises the separation between the two boys. Yet, notably, the final separation is not treated sentimentally; rather the tone here is a stoic acceptance that life goes on. The implication is that children, despite their innocence, perhaps have a certain natural wisdom that adults, in the inevitable accumulation of experience, forget: **'Children with their tough minds / Would understand'** (lines 28-29). There is a certain reticence about the boys' acceptance of losing one another that perhaps underplays the significance of the emotion they feel: their feelings are unspoken, communicated through physical gestures rather than words, but their bond is no less real for this. Again, the reference to blood alludes strongly to the notion of the boys as 'blood brothers'. The final line is masterly: **'We both knew we were going away for good'** (line 32). **'Going away'** is a euphemism for going to prison – the implication is that the end of their friendship signifies the end of the 'freedom' of childhood and entering a new phase of emotional development: the 'prison' of adulthood.

(5) Hunter. S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (New York, USA: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005).

(6) Willy Russell, *Blood Brothers* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2001).

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'After a Friendship' is a poem about childhood friendship and love. It explores the significance of childhood friendship – what this means in the emotional journey we travel along in life – as well as a meditation on the nature of memory. Minhinnick employs the traditional ballad form, but modifies this in ways that allow him to explore the experience of memory as something not logical and linear, but accumulative, messily jumbled up with emotion and experience.

The poem also exemplifies Minhinnick's concern with nature, the environment and natural processes in its emphasis on the physicality of the human experience. In particular, the boys' friendship is expressed not through words but through primal actions: a fight that ends with a bloody face. This ties in with one of the major themes of Minhinnick's writing: an attempt to place humans within the natural world, rather than as somehow transcendently above it.

Ultimately, this is a poem that explores a critical phase in human life: the end of the freedom of childhood and the beginning of adolescence. The poem implicitly asks whether the transition to adulthood is a time of emotional maturity or emotional imprisonment. In this way, the poem explores feelings which are so often sublimated or repressed rather than expressed.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

- In what way does the poem deviate from the traditional ballad form? To what effect?
- What kind of language is used to describe the speaker's friend?
- What is the significance of the natural imagery used in the poem?
- Is this a masculine representation of childhood/friendship?

SECTION 5

PHOTOGRAPHS



Photo credited to Robert Minhinnick.

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Interview with Robert Minhinnick: carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showdoc=14;doctype=interview

Another, more recent interview: walesartsreview.org/eamon-bourke-talks-to-robert-minhinnick

Information and critical commentary on Minhinnick's writing: literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/robert-minhinnick

Information on Sustainable Wales, an organisation co-founded by Minhinnick: sustainablewales.org.uk

SECTION 7

BIBLIOGRAPHY: FURTHER READING

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We are grateful for the financial support of Swansea University, The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh Writing in English.

Pascale Petit

'My Mother's Perfume'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Pascale Petit was born in Paris in 1953 to a French father and a Welsh mother, although she was brought up mainly in south Wales. She studied sculpture at the Royal College of Art in London, and it was not until her mid-40s that she published the first collection of her poetry: *Heart of a Deer* (1998). This collection contained many features that frequently recur in Petit’s subsequent poems, such as hybrid human/animal characters, as well as her attempts to work through, in poetry, the difficult family environment she experienced growing up, particularly her abusive father and her mother’s mental illness.

Petit’s second collection *The Zoo Father* (2001) was followed by *The Huntress* (2005), both continuing her use of the natural world as a source of poetic inspiration and allegory. *The Wounded Deer* (2005) and *What the Water Gave Me* (2010) were written in response to the life and art of Frida Kahlo (1907–1954). Petit’s travels through the Amazonian jungle in Peru and Venezuela provided much material for *Fauverie* (2014) and *Mama Amazonica* (2017), in which she imagines her mother’s treatment ‘not in the psychiatric ward, but inside pristine primary deep jungle’.¹ Petit’s most recent collection *Tiger Girl* (2020) shifts its focus onto her Indian grandmother and draws on the jungles of India to connect poaching, species extinction and childhood trauma.

Among many awards and honours Petit has received for her work, *Mama Amazonica* won the 2020 Laurel Prize, which is for poetry collections that have ‘nature and the environment at their heart’; her poem ‘Indian Paradise Flycatcher’ won the 2020 Keats-Shelley Prize for Poetry; and in 2018 she was made a Fellow of the Royal Society for Literature.²

(1) Pascale Petit, ‘Pascale Petit’s Blog’, *Blog Spot*, n.d, pascalepetit.blogspot.com

(2) Simon Armitage, ‘The Laurel Prize 2020 – Winners!’, *Simon Armitage The Official Website*, 2020, simonarmitage.com/the-laurel-prize-shortlist
Keats-Shelley Memorial Association, ‘KEATS-SHELLEY PRIZE 2020’, *Keats-Shelley Memorial Association*, n.d, keats-shelley.org/prizes/keats_shelley_prize_2020
The Royal Society of Literature, ‘Pascale Petit’, *The Royal Society of Literature*, n.d, rsliterature.org/fellow/pascale-petit

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The title suggests very strongly that the poem will have a first-person speaker and be about their family. **'My Mother's Perfume'** could refer to the smell of the mother herself, when she is present, or the liquid scent in a bottle, when she is absent. In either case, the importance of the sense of smell to the poem, rather than, for instance, the sense of sight or touch, is foregrounded by the title. This could indicate a physical absence of maternal contact but it is also worth considering the intricate and intimate relationship between the olfactory senses (smell), memory, and emotion.³ Smells enter the limbic system very quickly, which is the part of the brain that deals with emotional responses. In this way, smells can be the longest lasting of human memories, as well as the most emotive, and Petit utilises this connection throughout the poem to create the emotional power of the speaker's recollections and thoughts of their mother.

Form.

The poem's form contains internal conflicts despite its very regular appearance on the page. It is one stanza of 28 lines, composed of alternating long lines (between 12 and 19 syllables) and shorter indented lines (between 3 and 9 syllables). Only one of the longer lines (line 3) and four of the shorter lines (lines 8, 20, 26, and 28) are also the end of a sentence (end-stopped). Most of the poem's sentences run over the line ends (enjambment) which suggests that the form and the content are not in unison. The poem is free verse. The definition of free verse poetry is a poem that does not follow any pattern, metre or formal structure. This style of poetry is often closely associated with a conversational tone or characteristics of speech.

(3) Colleen Walsh, 'What the nose knows', *The Harvard Gazette*, 2020,

news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/02/how-scent-emotion-and-memory-are-intertwined-and-exploited

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-3.

A personal, possibly intimate, tone is established by the poem opening '**Strange how**', rather than the more grammatically correct '*It was **strange how***'. This informality is reinforced by the use of '**I'd**' in line 4, rather than '*I would*' and is characteristic of the conversational and confessional tone of Petit's poetry. It certainly is far beyond the realms of probability that the speaker, inside a house, can smell their mother '**long before**' her taxi arrives outside. Therefore, this indicates that memory, emotion, and imagination are causing an olfactory hallucination. This is supported by the description of the mother's scent as '**a jade cloud**', showing it has taken on a visible, green form to the speaker. Jade is a valuable and rare mineral mostly found in South-East Asia; it has no noticeable smell to the human nose and is not used in the manufacture of perfumes. Therefore, the associations formed by the speaker between their mother and jade must have significances other than scent, which could include being exotic and attractive, yet cold and hard. The intense colouring of jade makes it something out of the ordinary, and it seems to enter the speaker's world only for brief moments, like the mother. The thought of the mother's imminent arrival makes the speaker visit the '**loo**', which is more informal language, possibly reflecting the speaker's vocabulary as a child. Despite the lack of further detail here, the fear regarding the mother's arrival revealed later in the poem suggests that this visit to the toilet is to relieve a sudden pressure on bladder or bowel, rather than to wash their face or brush their teeth.

Lines 4-6.

The idea that the mother's return will not result in a warm, natural reunion is further advanced by the speaker having to '**prepare**' for it by '**trying to remember her face, without feeling afraid.**' This fear could stem from the effort of trying to recall the mother's face, or simply from the image of the face itself and therefore the impending arrival of the mother. Either way, it shows how visual memory is less powerful to the speaker than olfactory memory. The concerted attempts appear to be successful as the speaker gets '**braver**' the '**nearer**' the mother comes to arriving at the house.

Lines 7-9.

However, the speaker's memory of the mother is still linked more strongly with smell than sight as the efforts at remembering the mother's face evoke instead '**her scent**' as the '**taste**' of '**coins in the bottom / of her handbag.**' Like the jade mentioned previously, coins have a value but are cold and hard. That they seem to be loose in her handbag also points to an internal and hidden disordering as the coins are not carefully kept in a purse where they should be but are possibly sticky and/or dirty from the detritus of the bottom of a handbag. In any case, the coins would have a metallic and unpalatable taste. There is a jump in perspective as the speaker moves from her childhood recollections to the present day '**forty years on**' and the idea the mother might appear lingers. The statement that the speaker is only '**half-expecting**' the mother to arrive indicates she is estranged or dead.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 10-12.

The speaker can summon the presence of the mother by smelling the **'expensive'** perfume she used to wear – **'Shalimar'**. Possessing a bottle of this can be seen as an attempt to reconnect with the mother. Although control of the scent is now in the adult speaker's hands, it still requires **'daring'** as the smell remains so powerful that **'only a whiff'** is enough to dredge up their painful childhood memories.

Lines 13-15.

Shalimar was created by Guerlain in 1925 and is described as an 'oriental fragrance'.⁴ This south-east Asian connection provides a link to the jade mentioned in line 2. The **'vanilla orchid vine'**, which does not grow in Wales, further underlines, with alliteration for emphasis, the exotic, therefore distant, nature of the mother's perfume and, by association, the mother herself. The speaker's visual memory is now stimulated by this direct access to the scent and the mother's **'ghostly face'** – inferring she is dead – is imagined as if it **'might shiver like Christ's face on Veronica's veil'**. This veil was an icon of the Christian church in the Middle Ages and was said to bear an image of Christ after Veronica used it to wipe the sweat and blood from his face as he carried his cross to the crucifixion. This simile connects, in the speaker's mind, the mother with persecution, execution, and resurrection, although **'might'** is an important verb here as it indicates the speaker is thinking of possible, not definite, images. The image of Christ's face on the veil is also pictured as **'a green-gold blossom'**. Green has a mix of connotations, ranging from healthy plants to sick people, while gold is a hard and cold form of wealth. These colours also recall the jade cloud and the coins in the mother's handbag.

Lines 16-19.

The poem's narrative does not stay long in the speaker's present as the scent of the perfume transports them **'back to / to the first day of the school holidays'**. The speaker discloses how they would kiss the **'glass'** to prepare for kissing the mother's cheek. The **'glass'** could refer to a window or be the old-fashioned term for a mirror (like Alice and *Through the Looking-Glass*⁵) but in either case the same inference can be drawn – that the mother's cheek is hard and cold, rather than soft and warm, subverting conventional expectations of maternal love and care. The only difference would be that the mirror as a mother-substitute throws a reflection of the speaker back on themselves while the window as a mother-substitute allows the speaker to observe the world outside. In addition, glass is brittle and fragile, reflecting the mother's psychological state.

(4) Guerlain Paris, 'Shalimar', Guerlain, n.d, guerlain.com/uk/en-uk/fragrance/woman/collections/shalimar

(5) Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (London: Penguin Publishing Ltd, 1994).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 20–21.

Still in the speaker's childhood memories, '**the air turned amber**', as they looked for their mother's taxi. Amber is the orange-coloured resin of trees and is used in Shalimar. This again shows the power of memory and the imagination to conjure scents at emotional times, as there would not be a real source of this smell prior to the mother's arrival. The mother is described as a '**speck**', as if she were tiny and not human. The time switches rapidly again to the speaker's present as they say '**Even now**' how the smell of vanilla physically hurts them, expressed in the language of old-fashioned child discipline: the '**cane**'. Sight and smell mix in the speaker's mind to indicate how childhood traumas endure in their adult life.

Lines 22–24.

The use of '**But**' shows that the scent of '**roses and jasmine**' have a counteracting, positive effect on the speaker compared to the pain caused by the smell of vanilla. These '**top notes**' from the perfume are, unlike vanilla and amber, also found in '**Grandmother's garden**' as they walk towards the taxi when it arrives. Therefore, these scents are not exclusively connected to the mother's perfume. The use of '**wading**' gives a dream-like impression that the garden is overflowing with roses and jasmine, which are '**fragrant**', invariably meaning a pleasant smell. This could suggest a hope that this reunion with their mother might be better. However, the '**gloved hand**', a barrier that prevents the warmth of human contact, and the taxi being '**black**', suggest the speaker's hopes will be dashed once more. Alternatively, this scene could be read as one where the speaker feels safe in her grandmother's garden and the mother's arrival is unwelcome and threatening.

Lines 25–28.

The tense now changes from past (line 19: '**scanned**') to present, even though this event is still the speaker's childhood memory: '**And for a / moment I think I am safe.**' This present tense continues to the end of the poem as '**Maman turns to me**'. The exotic and distant associations that the poem has created around the mother are emphasised here by the French word for 'mom', in contrast with the grandmother who is named in the English way. This is the moment the speaker realises they are not '**safe**' as the look on the mother's face is enough to show that her mental illness still afflicts her. The role of the perfume as a representation of the mother is reinforced by the simile of her '**smile**' being like '**a dropped / perfume bottle**'. It is difficult to picture exactly how a dropped bottle could look like a smile; perhaps the facial responses one might make to such an accident could include a grimace, or the liquid could streak across the floor in a smile-like semi-circle. The overall image is one of an unintended waste of a valuable substance, and this is further underlined by the mother's '**essence**' being '**spilt**' by her mental illness.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

As the title indicates, the sense of smell is central to the poem. However, the reader will not be able to smell anything from the poem itself, of course, and so the poet's choice of words, the images they create, and the reader's own imagination and memories need to perform a certain amount of interpretative work for the poem to have impact. Part of the poem's success is how the other senses, particularly sight and touch, are brought into the equation as, ultimately, all our senses can be combined in memories.

The difficulty in establishing boundaries and cordoning off areas is reflected by the poem's form. Despite its regular appearance at first glance, the sentences overflow beyond the line ends and past and present are blurred. While the two types of lines could reflect the two viewpoints – the child's experiences at the time and the adult's thoughts when reflecting on the past – the merging of the perspectives and the changing of the tenses show how this trauma lives on in the speaker's present and has not been successfully resolved. The regular form appears an attempt by the adult to establish order over the madness their younger self experienced, in the same way that owning a bottle of Shalimar is an attempt to control those memories. However, these feelings overwhelm the rigid, recurring form, which is incapable of sectioning the poem into neat and self-contained lines. While there is no rhyme and minimal use of metaphor, the poem's intensity is achieved through vivid and evocative imagery, with a devastatingly powerful simile to end the piece.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

- How simple or complicated is the language that the poem uses?
- How does the form of the poem on the page play a part in the poem's meaning?
- How reliable do you find the speaker's version of events?
- What level of sympathy do you have for the speaker and the mother?

SECTION 5

PHOTOGRAPHS



Credit to Pascale Petit
(pascalpetit.co.uk).

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Information about *The Huntress* (2005), the collection from which 'My Mother's Perfume' is taken:
serenbooks.com/productdisplay/huntress

Petit Pascale's blog: pascalepetit.blogspot.com

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'Pascale Petit's Workshop' (*Guardian*): theguardian.com/books/2006/jun/08/poetry2

Petit Pascale's biography by *Poetry International*:
poetryinternational.org/pi/poet/18168/Pascale-Petit/en/tile



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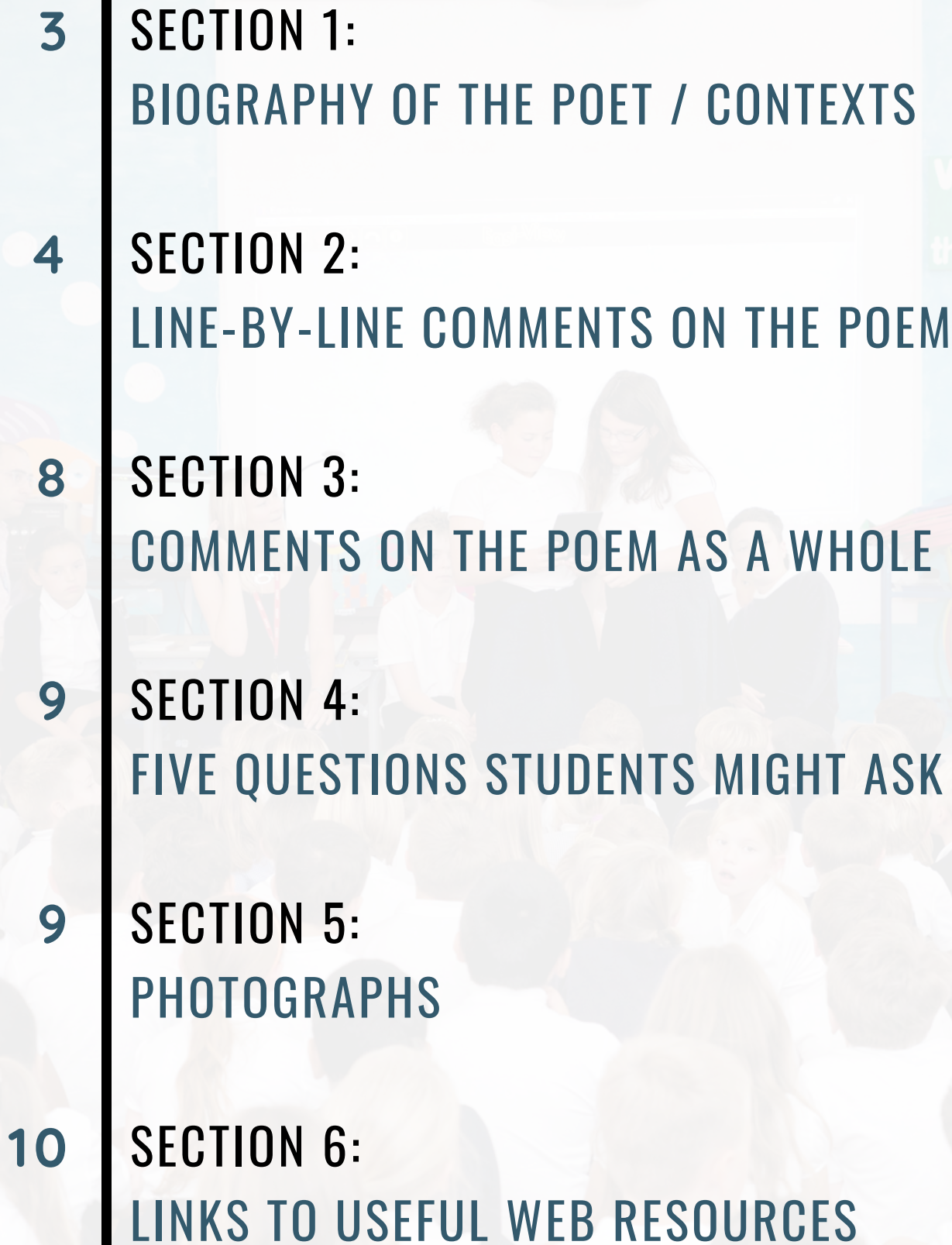
CREW, Swansea University
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Owen Sheers

'Eclipse'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Owen Sheers is an author, poet and playwright, who was born in Suva, Fiji, in 1974, and was brought up, from the age of nine, in the village of Llanddewi Rhydderch, near Abergavenny. He read English at New College, Oxford and then went on to study an MA in Creative Writing at University of East Anglia, under the former poet laureate Andrew Motion. Sheers has published two poetry collections, *The Blue Book* in 2000 and *Skirrid Hill* in 2005. The former title is a reference to government papers that were published in 1847 to report on the state of education in Wales; the latter makes reference to the landscape of the Black Mountains where Sheers grew up. Having been shortlisted for the Wales Book of the Year award for *The Blue Book* in 2000, Sheers went on to win the award in 2005 for his debut prose work *The Dust Diaries* (2004).

In 2009, Sheers published *A Poet’s Guide to Britain* following a six-part series about poetry and the landscape that he had written and presented for BBC 4. This anthology highlighted the relationship between poetry and place, mirroring the emphasis that Sheers puts on place within his own works, particularly when he writes about the Welsh landscape as he often does in his earlier poetry.

Sheers’s work has examined Welsh society, culture, and history, yet he describes himself ‘as a writer from Wales, rather than being a Welsh writer’.[1] In 2012, he was appointed as the Welsh Rugby Union’s first writer in residence, following which he published *Calon: A Journey to the Heart of Welsh Rugby*. Combining writing and rugby, Sheers described the role as his ‘perfect job’[2] – he was himself a former scrum half for Gwent County. In 2016 he wrote *The Green Hollow*, a ‘film-poem’ commemorating the 50th anniversary of the 1966 Aberfan disaster.

Sheers is currently Professor of Creativity at Swansea University.

(1) ‘Owen Sheers Interview’, *Poetry Archive* [online]. Available at:

<https://www.poetryarchive.org/interview/owen-sheers-interview> (Accessed 28 August 2018).

(2) ‘WRU’s artist in residence Owen Sheers talks of his “dream job”’, *WalesOnline*, 11 February 2012. Available at:

<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/lifestyle/showbiz/wrus-artist-residence-owen-sheers-2035770> (Accessed 28 August 2018).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'Eclipse' comes from Owen Sheers's debut poetry collection *The Blue Book* (2000), and the title is ambiguous both in terms of content and grammar. We do not know whether this is the noun eclipse, which refers to the natural phenomenon, or the verb eclipse, gesturing to something (a person? A relationship?) that has been overshadowed. However, the imagery of dark and light is immediately evoked, both literally and figuratively - in terms of the 'monochrome' effect of a natural eclipse and idiomatically as in 'being kept in the dark' or 'seeing the light'.

Upon reading the poem, we learn that Sheers is using both forms of 'eclipse'. The poem dramatises the speaker's realisation that (he?) has been usurped by a new lover. This realisation mirrors the gradual movement of the natural eclipse that is being witnessed throughout the poem. One is not supposed to look directly at an eclipse, so the metaphor effectively suggests the speaker's inability (or refusal?) at the beginning of the poem to accept that the relationship is over. Like facing the eclipse, it is difficult for him to face the truth.

Form.

The poem is structured as a series of seven couplets and a final one-lined stanza, emphasising the transition of the speaker from a state of togetherness to separation. Sheers uses a series of end-stopped lines throughout the poem, except for stanza 4 where the full eclipse occurs and the speaker realises that there is something '**between us**' (line 8). The full stop marks a break between the two halves of the poem. Meanwhile, the slow pace or rhythm of the poem reflects the slow movement of the eclipse and the long time it takes the speaker to understand that the relationship is over.

Lines 1-4.

The opening lines establish the divided physical locations of the speaker in the countryside and the addressee in the city. There is the suggestion of a couple that have been together but who are now separate: '**We watched it apart**'. This main clause begins with the first person plural 'We' to open the poem, suggesting a sense of togetherness. However, this is revoked with the speaker's use of the adverb '**apart**', indicating a separation. The couple are physically apart, but at this stage this separation could be temporary as we don't know the relationship has (already?) ended.

The use of anaphora (the use of a word referring back to a word used earlier in a text) in the opening line through the pronoun 'it' means that the reader refers back to the title for meaning, and we understand that the speaker is referring to a natural eclipse.[3] The 'it' then becomes the '**half-darkness**', and we see a transition from 'it' simply referring to the natural eclipse to something else. Could 'it' be referring to another man? This is because the 'half-darkness fall[s] over' her, which could be a reference to the idiom 'to fall for someone'. It could even refer to the shadow another person cast over her in the moonlight.

(3) There was a rare and widely viewed solar eclipse visible from Britain in August 1999 (it was a total eclipse when viewed from the south-west coast of England).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-4 (continued).

We learn that something could be awry in the couple's relationship, as the speaker ponders whether it was **'my mistake'** to watch the eclipse separately. The phrase is suggestive of regret but later we wonder if it was already too late. The act of viewing the eclipse (together or apart) suggests the idea of (different) perspectives or points of view and hints at a fractured relationship.

The alignment of 'half-darkness' with **'the city'** in the opening stanza and the freedom of the **'flying'** rooks in the second stanza, a pastoral image, sets up a contrast between city and country, the geographical separation echoing the division between speaker and addressee. But although they are in separate places, both the speaker and the addressee seem to be connected by the eclipse – demonstrating an interconnectedness between humanity and nature that the poem explores throughout.

The reference to a **'spreading hand'** also suggests a spreading apart of the couple. Furthermore, this 'spreading hand' could be perceived as a metaphor for the spread of darkness across the fields. A spread-out hand could equally be seen as a gesture to stop or to stay away. Thus the darkness, with its connotations of secrecy (or idiomatically, 'being in the dark'), signifies the end of the relationship because the addressee has moved on to someone else – perhaps unbeknown to the speaker at this point.

The number three, or tripling, is suggested by the eclipse itself, due to it being an alignment of the sun, the moon and the earth. Invoking the number three could also refer to the love triangle that is present in the poem. Here, this tripling is made explicit through the rooks in these lines, whose typically 'greyish-white face[s]'^[4] also enhance the dark and light imagery that is prominent throughout the poem.

Lines 5-8.

These lines describe the moment of the eclipse in which earth, moon and sun are aligned, which seems to give the speaker some hope that the couple could be together again. However, as the eclipse passes, hope is confronted by the speaker's awareness that the relationship may be over, reinforced by the full stop at the end of line eight after the word **'us'**, grammatically putting an end to their relationship.

The use of the conjunction **'But'** also indicates a shift in the mindset of the speaker. This shift moves away from the togetherness that he had hoped for and the separateness that is a reality towards the gradual realisation that there is something **'between us'**. It is an ironic statement: 'something between us' means a relationship beyond friendship, but here it is also an allusion to the 'shadow' of the third party who has come between them.

In these lines the speaker imagines the former lovers together or **'connected again'**, which could be an effect of the eclipse. The fact that a solar eclipse gives the impression of night when it is day might allude metaphorically to the speaker being under a misapprehension concerning the relationship.

[4] RSPB Bird A-Z, 'Rook' [online]. Available at: <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/rook/> (Accessed 28 November 2018).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 5-8 (continued).

Of course, another interpretation is that the sight of the eclipse has **'unlocked'** a memory in him, which is reinforced by the romantic image of the moon **'passing over'** them. Is he thinking about a time when they were together in the moonlight, and this image has been ignited by the eclipse? The idea that he is reflecting on a memory is enhanced through Sheers's use of alliteration – the alliterative 'm' in these lines slows the pace as the moon and earth move in direct alignment with the sun, and the intrusive 'breeze' enters the scene almost like an awakening. This gentle wind has a calming effect on the speaker as he comes to realise that all is not what it seems.

The paradoxical **'mid-day midnight'** where the eclipse makes it look like night time even though it is day could again suggest the diametrically opposed positions of the speaker and the addressee towards the relationship – with the speaker still pining after the relationship and the addressee knowing that it is over.

A line break occurs between lines seven and eight at the point where the eclipse is at its peak. This opening up of the lines creates a sense of exposure. Has he been exposed to the truth? Is he now seeing their relationship from a different perspective? The use of enjambment between lines 7 and 8 also highlights the fact that the solar eclipse is in full alignment, because it connects the 'day' (representing sunlight) in line 7, with both the moon and the couple or 'us' (who are on earth) in line 8. It also quickens the pace. Like the eclipse, perhaps the relationship was a short affair that came and went suddenly? Or, could it be alluding to the speed that it took the addressee to move on to someone else?

Lines 9-10.

From these lines onwards to the end of the poem, the focus is on the speaker's and addressee's cooling relationship and the presence of the other man. The eclipse, like their relationship, is now in the past. A rhyming couplet is used in this stanza. Could Sheers be trying to replicate the switching on of a lightbulb, as a metaphor for the speaker's realisation, reinforced by the fact that the rhyme is **'light'** and **'night'**? This could signal a moment of sudden realisation, or it could mean that light has been shed on the truth and he is no longer in the dark, as he was during the eclipse when he recalled the memory of them together. All is not what it seems in an eclipse, where day becomes night, and this uncertainty is transferred to the status of the relationship.

Lines 11-12.

In these lines the speaker explicitly refers to the other man. Following on from his discovery after he **'learnt'** (that the relationship is actually over) in the previous stanza, the 'half-darkness' (line 2) or the 'shadow' (line 8) has now become **'his'**. With the involvement of a third person the speaker has now become eclipsed, like the sun when the moon moves in between it and the earth.

The speaker recognises the **'cooled'** tone in the addressee's voice now that she has another person in her life. There is a distance between them, both literally, since they are speaking on the phone, and metaphorically as her language shortens or becomes **'clipped'**. Is she being careful about what she says on the phone in the presence of her new lover? Or is she now emotionally detached from the speaker and has nothing more to say? The fact that her voice becomes 'eclipsed' indicates that she is moving into the speaker's past.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 13-14.

These lines describe how the discovery that the addressee is with another man has affected the speaker. The fact he refers to **'the dream'** with the definite article signals that he has the same image in his head before going to sleep each night: that of the addressee with the other man.

Sheers once again uses a fronted conjunction (a conjunction positioned at the beginning of a sentence) in line 13 to show the after-effects that coming to terms with the ending of this relationship is having on the speaker. Instead of remembering himself with his former lover, as he did during the eclipse, his vision is now dominated by the image of her and the other man together. This vision is quite intimate and has sexual connotations; the woman's **'up-looking face'** suggests that she is lying on her back, which has been overshadowed by **'his shadow'**. The parenthetical dashes indicate the fixedness of the speaker on this vision, and emphasise how it dominates his thoughts. They also indicate a pause, which may represent the speaker's inability to move forward. The reference to **'falling'**, which is repeated in line 15, could link back to the **'fall over you'** in the opening stanza, strengthening the idea that the opening 'half-darkness' is actually symbolic of the other man.

Line 15.

The repetition of 'his shadow' in the final line makes this the dominant image at the close of the poem. The speaker is, arguably, eclipsed. Though the final line also begins with **'his'** and ends with **'me'**, it is in the passive voice, reflecting the prominence of each man in the addressee's life. The fact that the poem begins with the first person plural, 'we', and then ends with the first person singular, 'me' symbolises the status of the speaker (once part of a couple and now alone). The solitary image of the speaker is also reflected in this the fact this is the only one-lined stanza in the entire poem.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

Sheers establishes the notion of togetherness and separation through the metaphor and image of the eclipse, focusing on its gradual movement, its dark and light colouring, and its process. The theme of relationships, specifically the loss of a relationship, is pertinent when reading this poem. The poem highlights the one-sidedness of relationships when one party moves on and the other struggles to come to terms with its having ended.

Whilst the loss of a relationship may be significant, perhaps the contemplative or meditative potential within the natural world, and how it can help us to reflect on our own lives, is important too. Sheers connects the speaker with the addressee through nature (the eclipse) to showcase how they were once connected. However, he uses the same image to demonstrate how the speaker comes to realise that the relationship is over.

The interconnectedness of humanity and the natural world is commonplace in Sheers's poetry. In another of his poems from *The Blue Book*, titled 'The Pond', Sheers writes about how he takes 'things' to the pond, such as his 'grandfather's death', his 'first kiss', or his 'arguments', [5] presumably to think these things through. Thus, the notion that nature is a tool for human contemplation is worth exploring in 'Eclipse'. This interconnectedness is shown by how, though we can be miles apart physically, we are always looking at the same sun/moon and it is this which connects us to each other, even if we are looking at it from a different perspective.

Tripling is important in this poem, although it is not immediately clear why. We are first introduced to it via the eclipse, which is an alignment of the sun, the earth and the moon. As we later discover, through the references to 'mid-day' (line 7) and '**the moon's shadow**' (line 8), the poet is referring to a solar eclipse. This means that the moon is between the sun and the earth. However, we realise the significance of tripling by the end of the poem: to convey a love triangle.

Sheers may have used an eclipse because it is a rare natural phenomenon, and this successfully conveys the effect that the relationship had on the speaker; it was special, perhaps even a rare experience. Maybe the speaker feels like it will be a long time before he feels like that again.

(5) Owen Sheers, 'The Pond', in *The Blue Book*, p. 22, l. 1, l. 4, l. 7 and l. 10.

FIVE QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What does the figure of the eclipse make you think of?

Aside from the eclipse, what is the most dominant image in the poem and why?

How important to the poem is the imagery of light and darkness?

Why might the poem be structured as it is? Consider the couplet, the line break in stanza 4 and final solitary line?

How does this poem show the relationship between humanity and the natural world?

SECTION 5

(links active August 2018)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

A recent picture of Owen Sheers, taken from his website:

http://www.owensheers.co.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/owen_large_feb-15.jpg

A range of images taken of the solar eclipse in South Wales in 2015:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-31971509>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

What is an eclipse?

<https://www.nasa.gov/audience/forstudents/5-8/features/nasa-knows/what-is-an-eclipse-58>

Owen Sheers's website:

<http://www.owensheers.co.uk/>

Owen's Sheers's profile on the BBC website:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/sites/owen-sheers/>

British Council Literature, Owen Sheers:

<https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/owen-sheers>

Owen Sheers as a Poet in Residence at the Poetry Archive, where he talks about poetry and answers questions from members of the public:

<https://www.poetryarchive.org/poet-in-residence/23185>

Owen Sheers talks about the influence of his Welsh heritage on his writing, from the landscape to the lives of the small town boys he grew up with:

<https://www.poetryarchive.org/interview/owen-sheers-interview>

Wales Arts Review's interviews and articles on Owen Sheers:

<http://www.walesartsreview.org/?s=owen+sheers>

WJEC's exclusive interview with poet:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeB9zK1D1Oo>

Twitter link:

<https://twitter.com/owensheers>



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