

Peter Gruffydd

'Some Fathers'

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.)

Peter Gruffydd was born in Liverpool in 1935. He first moved to Wales at the age of five, following his evacuation in early 1941 (due to the Second World War). Having already learned Welsh, he then began studying English at Bangor University. His time living in Wales was brief, and he has spent most of his life in England, living in Liverpool, the West Midlands, and Bristol. Gruffydd was a member of Plaid Cymru and a Welsh nationalist (his movement into Welsh politics mirrors that of the Welsh intellectual Saunders Lewis, an ardent nationalist who was born in Liverpool). Gruffydd’s nationalist politics is evident in some of his poetry, such as ‘The Small Nation’, which Matthew Jarvis suggests ‘is substantially a lament for a Wales that the poem’s speaker sees as having lost courage’, and which foresees ‘The slow funeral of a small nation’.¹

Before he became known by the surname with which he appears in the *Poetry 1900–2000* anthology, Gruffydd published under the name Peter M. Griffith (the English-spelling, but pronounced in a similar same way). In 1993, Gruffydd became a founder member of the Welsh Branch of PEN International (now Wales PEN Cymru), an organisation which advocates on behalf of writers across the world.

Although his poems have appeared in several poetry magazines, Gruffydd has one solitary collection to his name, 1972’s *The Shivering Seed*. His earliest significant poetry publication was in *Triad*, with two other notable Welsh ‘Second Flowering’ poets,² Harri Webb and Meic Stephens.

(1) Matthew Jarvis, ‘Poetry Wales in the 1960s and 1970s’, in *British Literature in Transition, 1960–1980: Flower Power*, ed. Kate McLoughlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 225–243, p. 233.

(2) A term often given to Anglophone Welsh poets from the 1960s, taken from Meic Stephen’s influential essay, ‘The Second Flowering’, *Poetry Wales* 3.3 (Winter 1967/8).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'Some Fathers' is an ambiguous title, giving the reader a general impression of the subject of the poem, but not giving them a clue about whether this will be a kind of ode to 'some' good fathers, or a poem about the failings of others (or those somewhere in between). This lack of detail (and indeed the sparse language that frequently masks the speaker's opinion), is a theme that haunts the poem throughout.

Form.

The poem is comprised of four stanzas of between eight and ten lines (9, 10, 8, 10). It does not have a regular rhyme scheme, and is written in free verse. Consequently, it follows a natural speech pattern, and a reader will note how the syntax is colloquial, and not re-ordered to 'fit' with a particular pattern or poetic style. Nonetheless, the poem is not without some recognisable formal poetic characteristics. Its stanzas follow a similar, if not identical pattern, and the poem's first two stanzas are written in the past tense, while the following two are written in the present tense (giving the poem a kind of structural symmetry).

Lines 1-3.

Notice the immediate use of the preposition '**They**', which distances the speaker from the poem's subject(s). Already, there is a sense that the speaker does not identify with the men described – presumably fathers though not named as such. There is no sense here that the poem is easing the reader in, their initiation into the direct, colloquial mode of address is instant. This directness is, at first, fairly innocuous. These fathers, who '**sloped off / to the pub**' and '**grew potatoes**', don't seem particularly remarkable at first. Also, note how they need to borrow '**ten bob**': instantly the speaker undermines their authority insofar as this is often tied to economic independence. However, from the description of 'caulis' (cauliflowers) and '**leeks**' grown in '**dead-straight lines**', we can see some evidence of the fathers' fastidiousness. The vegetables, grown in formation, resemble soldiers (foreshadowing the upcoming military references in the following stanzas).

Lines 4-6.

Here there is a shift to a more serious, considered tone. The speaker makes a point of the fathers' military service, and their memory of the '**Second World War**' is one of active duty (not as children, or read about in history books). A reader might think about this poem in the context of Gruffydd's own experience of the war, as an English evacuee living in Wales. Consequently, these stories of '**crack[ing] jokes about Hitler**' take on a more personal, autobiographical character. Furthermore, the fact that these fathers served in the armed forces does not define their character (it's likely that some, if not all, were conscripted into the armed forces). As such, they retain their humour ('**even**' aiming cynical jibes at the then Prime Minister, '[Winston] **Churchill**'). The speaker, who is perhaps a son overhearing his father and friends talking, seems perturbed by their jokes at the (former) Prime Minister's expense).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 7-9.

After the dearth of description in the opening six lines, Gruffydd changes the pace of the poem, enlivening his verse with key adjectives. The fathers, we are told, did '**odd things**', such as '**look[ing] after / old ladies in their rich incontinence**' (my emphasis). That these simple acts of kindness appear odd to the speaker in this verse is strange. The word '**odd**' invites the reader to speculate about an unstated or hidden reason for their actions. One way to understand it might be to consider the likelihood that the '**old ladies**' who are being looked after had lost their sons and/or daughters in the war, so the survivors have taken it upon themselves to look after them in their dotage (the fathers neglecting to tell their children the real reason for looking after the elderly, to shield the children from the reality of the war). Of course, there is also an implication of an ulterior motive behind this caring act, as the adjective '**rich**' implies that there may be some financial reward to be gained from doing caring for these women, though '**rich incontinence**' suggests physical frailty and lack of control (as well as generosity). A more obviously '**odd**' pursuit might be those fathers who '**drew cartoons**', and again Gruffydd is emphasising their humour and also creativity. A reader might also want to compare the creative pursuit of '**sketch[ing]**' for '**small mags**' with the more rigid, '**dead-straight lines**' in which the vegetables are grown. Gruffydd here may also be suggesting that had they not served in the military and had their youth cut short, they may have pursued very different careers. '**Odd**' may also be a way of signalling the lack of comprehension or connection between a child and his father's generation.

Lines 10-12.

Recalling the opening of the first stanza, the second begins again with the pronoun '**They**'. However, where the first stanza began with a recollection of something concrete (borrowing money, going to the pub), the second stanza introduces an element of doubt about the true character of the fathers. That they '**Seemed to have lots of patience**', is telling, and suggests that there is something unknowable about the father-figures being discussed. The pub, yet again, provides a form of escape for the fathers; a place in which their patience may not be tested as much as at home.

Lines 13-16.

Here is the first mention of the speaker's father (using the possessive pronoun '**mine**'), strengthening the confessional feel of the poem. The speaker remembers his father's '**second childhood**', or what might be more commonly referred to as a mid-life crisis. His behaviour is reckless (again, contrast this with the earlier image of the neat vegetable patch), and he '**regularly**' crashes his scooter. Also in these lines is the poem's first and only mention of colour ('**red**'). Something darker appears to be lurking underneath the surface (remember that this stanza begins by pondering *what seemed to be*, rather than *what actually was*). The father, who '**regularly came off**' his scooter, is clearly eager to be away from the family. It's worth also pointing out the humour in the portrayal of the father (the supposed responsible adult), behaving more like a child than the speaker himself.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 17-19.

The father's drinking is clearly causing problems in the household, as well as outside of it. **'Mother'**, the poem's only reference to a wife (and one of two mentions of women), serves only to 'nag' the father. Neither father or mother are ever referred to as 'husband' and/or 'wife', indicating that, to the speaker at least, their primary obligation is to their children and not each other. **'Sketching'** derives from 'sketchy' (as in behaviour, rather than sketch as in drawing), so to say that the father went **'sketching no more'** seems to suggest that he ceased his dubious/suspicious behaviour (but also that, assuming he is connected to the cartoon artist mentioned previously, he no longer indulged his creative side). The final line of the stanza concludes the poem's focus on the speaker's father, suggesting that he eventually ceased his erratic, drunken behaviour (which had perhaps been a way in which he could attempt to process trauma).

Lines 20-24.

The third stanza instigates a definite shift in tone from the previous two. Having concluded the first half of the poem with the speaker's father's return home, the speaker once again uses the authorial 'I' (as in line 4), but the poem has moved away from being a series of recollections to the present day: **'I'm a father now'**. The speaker's role as a father seems less focused on trips to the pub and 'odd' behaviour, and instead on the speaker's hopes for his own children. He hopes that his **'sons'** may one day be able to **'make tea / like tar'**, or **'keep allotments'**, and one day **'worry about their kids'**, emphasising the cyclical nature of family life (and introducing another one of the poem's key themes: cyclicity). The love of strong tea and allotments are aligned with an older generation and it almost appears that the speaker wants his children to become like his own father, rather than himself.

Lines 25-27.

The pronouns **'them'** and **'they'** in this section are deployed differently to the opening two stanzas. While the repetitive use of **'they'** in the opening line of the first and second stanzas creates a distance between the speaker and his (and other) father(s), in the third stanza it appears to allude to the speaker himself, as if he's seeing, or trying to see, himself. While referring to a hypothetical scenario in which his sons have become fathers themselves, the speaker implies that the listed offences have been felt personally, so it is the speaker who has been called **'old fart, stupid sod or worse'**, and that it is he (the speaker) who wonders where he **'went wrong'**, hoping perhaps only when his sons have the same experience will they realise the injustice, or at least the hurt, of their own accusations.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 28-32.

The imperative '**Pray**' begins the final stanza, and it has a pleading ring to it. Returning to the theme of war from the opening stanza, the fourth completes the poem's broadly cyclical structure (echoing the cyclical nature of family in the previous stanza). Further emphasising the cyclicity of the family unit (and the poem itself), the speaker refers disconsolately to '**Nuclear families**' which '**stagger on**', suggesting either that the family unit has always struggled on out of necessity, or that it might be unsustainable in the modern world. These '**Nuclear**' families (meaning families that exist as a single core, derived from 'nucleus') are '**bowed with labels**'.

Lines 33-37.

Once again, the speaker '**remember[s] those fathers**', who are different to both how he perceives himself and how he imagines his sons to be (again, the distance is created by the pronoun '**those**'). The fathers are now old and '**leaning on / sticks**', and still with '**pint in hand**', witnessing the '**outrageous stupidity**' of their sons (the speaker included). It appears that the speaker, in tandem with his increasing empathy with his father, is beginning to see how '**stupid**' he was as a child. Additionally, the meaning of '**cod-code**' is, presumably, a parodic code that the fathers use with one another (following their war-time experiences in which using code would have been part of day-to-day life). There is also a Welsh/English pun here, as 'cod' is the Welsh spelling of/word for 'code', placing this poem in a larger Welsh/British context.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

While 'Some Fathers' is clearly a poem about fatherhood and familial, generational cycles, it is also a poem about war and its effects and consequences. The experience of the speaker's father (and fathers more generally) in the poem's opening stanza is clearly one impacted by war. These men didn't just remember the war, they **'were in'** it, and would **'crack[...]** jokes about the wartime leaders, both allies and enemies. The **'old ladies'** that they look after are also affected by the war, and require the kindness of strangers to look after them **'in their rich incontinence'**. Although the poem emphasises the cyclical nature of families, it seems that **'those'** fathers are, as a result of their war-time experiences, always different to the kind of father that the speaker and his sons are/will become.

The war metaphor might even be taken a step further. Look again at the final stanza, with its warning about the effects of war on people, and not just those on the front lines. The returning soldiers **'keep graveyard horrors at bay / with favourite ales'**, rationalising their reliance on alcohol as a necessity, rather than an indulgence. There are two crucial images in this final stanza that give the poem a more outwardly cautionary, political tone. The first is the image of **'Nuclear families'**, and the second is the **'sperm-count falling day-by-day'**. A far more complex picture emerges from the combination of these very loaded phrases. Given the poem's focus on focus on war and family, there is potential to understand this poem (which is looking to the future with uncertainty), as one of post-nuclear anxiety. The (Second World) war that is referred to in the opening stanza was ostensibly ended by the use of hugely destructive nuclear bombs (in Hiroshima and Nagasaki), and the proximity of the word 'nuclear', with the image of lowering sperm counts appears to be a *double entendre*, or play on words (given that radiation from nuclear weapons is known to have an debilitating effect on fertility).

In a formal sense, the poem's language is colloquial, but also very precise. Gruffydd's uses of the subject pronouns **'they'**, **'their'**, and **'them'** are worth close attention, as is his reticence to use overly descriptive, adjective-heavy language. The overarching structure of the poem makes use of these pronouns effectively, but a reader might also notice the poem's movement from the general ('they'), to the specific ('mine', 'he'), to the personal ('I'), and back to general ('they'), as well as the movement from past, to present, to future tense (and back again).

FIVE QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Other than fatherhood, what do you think are the poem's most prominent recurring themes or images?

Is this poem funny in places? What role does humour play for the readers and/or for the characters?

Pay close attention to the speaker. Who are they? What can you tell about them from their descriptions of others?

Could you argue that this is a war poem?

Look at the poet's use of pronouns and adjectives. How they are used to different effects by the speaker?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5
(links active August 2019)
All links are clickable

Here is a picture of Welsh soldiers, displaying the kind of sense of humour typical in 'Some Fathers':
<https://martinjohnes.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/rwf-1940.jpg>

As an evacuee from Liverpool in Wales, Gruffydd would have encountered a very different culture (one that resulted in him learning the language and becoming a Welsh nationalist). Posters such as the one below were commonly used to encourage parents to send their children away from urban targets and to the relative safety of rural areas, such as north Wales:

<http://liverpoolblitz70.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/evacuation-poster-wwll.jpg>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

For more information about conscription and the way that the 'fathers' in the poem may have found themselves fighting on the frontlines, or for a glimpse into the experiences of Welsh soldiers, take a look at the following links:

<https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/yourcountry/overview/conscriptionww2/>

<https://martinjohnes.com/2012/07/04/welshness-welsh-soldiers-and-the-second-world-war/>

For some information about the branch of PEN International (Wales PEN Cymru that Gruffydd helped to establish, visit the following page:

<https://pen-international.org/centres/wales-pen-cymru>

Dr Jamie Harris

*Aberystwyth University
August, 2019*



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe



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