

Duncan Bush

““Caroline”: A County Life’

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.)

Duncan Bush was born in Cardiff in 1946. A late attender of university, he studied English and European Literature at Warwick, Oxford, and Duke University (USA). As a committed European, Bush lived for much of his life in Luxembourg, but he returned to Swansea each year and remained part of the Welsh intellectual and cultural scene.

His first publication was as a promising new poet in the Wales Arts Council’s *Three Young Anglo-Welsh Poets* collection in 1974, alongside Nigel Jenkins and Tony Curtis. This was followed with his own poetry collections: *Aquarium* (1983), *Salt* (1985), *Black Faces, Red Mouths* (1986), *Masks* (1994), *The Hook* (1997), and *Midway* (1998). Bush also wrote novels and drama, saying that he ‘need[ed] to move between these genres’.¹

Bush was also a Fellow of The Welsh Academy (*Yr Academi Gymreig*, the national society of writers in Wales) and he won many literary awards, including the Welsh Arts Council Prize for Poetry twice (for *Aquarium* and *Salt*), and the Arts Council of Wales’s Book of the Year award in 1995 for *Masks*. Bush’s poems have been praised for their ‘dramatic touch’ and their engagement with a range of contemporary social issues, including the miners’ strike in 1984, and the death of Princess Diana in 1997.² Bush died in 2017, leaving behind a varied and respected body of work.

(1) ‘Bush, Duncan’, [encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/bush-duncan](https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/bush-duncan) [Accessed 18 May 2020].

(2) ‘Bush, Duncan’, [encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/bush-duncan](https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/bush-duncan) [Accessed 18 May 2020].

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

“**Caroline**”: **A County Life**’ sounds more like the title of a book than that of a poem, suggesting that this poem is going to have a narrative structure – that is, a start, a middle and an end. The title indicates that the focus will be on a woman named Caroline who likely has a rural existence, but ‘**County**’ (rather than ‘Country’) brings with it particular connotations. ‘The county set’ is an idiomatic term for the landed gentry – the wealthy, established families who have traditionally been identified with activities such as hunting, as well as a sometimes stifling, conservative provincialism (see Web Resources below). This suggests that class, even more than a rural location, will be the focus of the poem. The quotation marks around ‘Caroline’ suggest that the name is a pseudonym, that the real name of the woman has been changed, perhaps to protect them in some way. Replacing the woman’s real name could identify the poem as a cautionary tale to warn others; as a technique, it takes the focus away from, yet also strangely highlights, the individual at the heart of this narrative.

Form.

The poem consists of ten four-line stanzas (quatrains), which give it a regular form and solid appearance on the page, with lines ranging from six to thirteen syllables long, and most being around ten. The poem makes use of iambic pentameter, reflecting the spoken patterns of the English language and emphasising the speaker as narrator. That the poem is unrhymed, with the sentences stretching over the line ends and often across stanzas, suggests that the form and the content are not in unison: it feels as if the rigid form were incapable of controlling the story and sectioning it into neat and self-contained chapters.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-4.

Everything the reader of the poem learns comes from the speaker, who briefly acknowledges in the first line that this is an attempt at recollection (**'I think'**). From here on the events of Caroline's life are delivered as fact and the speaker seeks to play the role of witness, rather than actor, in the tragedy. However, the **'I think'** frames and conditions the whole poem, suggesting as it does that the narrator's version of events is uncertain, perhaps unreliable, and potentially biased. It seems that Caroline has not married for love, but for wealth and prestige. The wall of her husband-to-be's country estate is what settles her decision, as it is **'dentilated'** and **'buttressed'** (like a castle wall, with holes for shooting arrows through). This wall is a physical symbol of the wealth and power the husband commands, the old money of the aristocracy that still live in castles and vast country homes. The syntax (word order) of this stanza is rather confusing and back to front, perhaps suggesting that Caroline's own thinking at this time may have been a bit disordered, and that her priorities for marriage (love against social standing) were possibly the wrong way round.

Lines 5-8.

Very often in this poem, sentences continue across stanzas. This stanza starts with the lower-case **'and'** to show that Caroline's story cannot be neatly contained by the narration. The wall stretches towards the **'land's long downslope'**, foreshadowing what this poem records: the long **'downslope'** of Caroline's life as she descends into alcoholism and then suicide. The wealth she is marrying into is physically displayed through the **'crumbling red'** bricks of the estate wall; like the wall, the family and their economic and social foundations are long-established and perhaps in decline. Caroline is described as a **'January bride'**, either in reference to the month of her wedding (which is an uncommon time of the year to get married, suggesting it might have been arranged in haste, perhaps due to a pregnancy), or perhaps more metaphorically meaning a young bride (early in the year) or a cold one (a winter month). She is **'aflush'**, which could refer to her being a 'blushing bride', still full of youth and vitality at this stage in her life. But the phrase 'flush with cash' also lurks behind this word, suggesting she is now rich thanks to her choice of husband.

Lines 9-12.

Caroline is **'aflush / with her own good looks'**, if not with her own money, but any happiness she has doesn't last for long. Within the space of two lines, the scene moves from wedding reception to honeymoon to divorce. The reception is **'swank'** (a public display intended to impress others) and the honeymoon on Mustique suggests that Caroline's husband is particularly rich and well-connected, as it is an exclusive holiday island for royals and megastars.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 13-16.

The speaker compares Caroline to **'failed students'** (l. 12) who hang around their university town, unable or unwilling to return home. This gives a certain air of immaturity to Caroline, but it also compares marriage and university as institutions, from which a person may be expelled for bad behaviour or asked to leave if certain standards are not met. Caroline has perhaps been brought up only for a marriage like this, and now that it is over, she has no concept of what else she could do with her life. Her status was affirmed by the marriage and then swiftly downgraded by divorce, and it seems the power and prestige have stayed with the husband, no doubt still behind his **'estate-wall'**, while Caroline is connected to **'bed-sits'**. Her son is unnamed, in keeping with the emotional distance portrayed between mother and child, and the **'badged blazer of flecked grey flannel'** he wears when returning **'each term'** from boarding school shows the privileged, ordered world he lives in – a world now separate from and different to Caroline's.

Lines 17-20.

The son has become a **'prig'** (a self-righteous and superior person) at only twelve. This is the language and mentality of public school children, and it conveys how the boarding school system can affect boys of his class, instilling particular values in them and discouraging displays of familial affection. Caroline's occasional sexual encounters are listed dispassionately, although they might be read as attempts to strike back at her ex-husband by sleeping with people he knows or even to whom he is related. Her choice of sexual partner may also reflect an ingrained snobbery as she tries, through her sexuality, to stay within the elite circle her husband lives in; the **'Lord Lieutenant of the county'** is presumably one of the most powerful and important men in that social group. These might be triumphs in a sense for Caroline, but they also lead to her personal disintegration when the gentry **'close ranks'** (l. 31).

Lines 21-24.

This stanza starts with a new sentence, as if announcing a specific new stage in Caroline's downfall. What follows is a gossipy list of her humiliations in the pub that supposedly signalled her descent into alcoholism. That she fell off her stool **'[f]wice'** is noted, as if each time had been much discussed and remembered by the watchful observers of her community. The pub is called **'The Flag'**, suggesting a nationalist, Conservative mindset of 'Queen and Country' attitudes. If it is the Union flag then the irony is suggested that it took Caroline's divorce (and so an end to the union of her marriage) for her to become a regular there. From this point on, it is Caroline's life that begins to **'[f]lag'**. Her voice becomes **'hectoring'** (to talk in a bullying way) and **'a bray'** (the noise a donkey makes), both of which are **'unfeminine'**, unfeminist and unflattering descriptions. There is perhaps a nod towards the vestiges of social status she maintains – she is **'eccentric'**, which is often the term used for unconventional people who have money – but the imagery of **'sour - / milk'** and **'rennet'** introduces another misogynistic aspect to the narration. Caroline has been portrayed as a failed mother, and now the metaphoric 'mother's milk' begins to curdle and spoil as she ages.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 25–28.

The milk falling through a sieve is like Caroline's life falling through her fingers. The tittle-tattle of village life is further evidenced by the two-faced barman who calls Caroline **'Margaret Rutherford'** behind her back. Rutherford was an actress famous for playing 'eccentric' older ladies, including Agatha Christie's Miss Marple. Then comes the shortest sentence in the poem: **'She started drinking in her room.'** This is now another turn in Caroline's story, as she withdraws from the community and public life almost entirely. It is not clear exactly why she stopped going to the pub, but perhaps it could have been due to financial worries, embarrassment, or the unkindness of the villagers.

Lines 29–32.

The speaker says that **'No biography can pinpoint where a life / first started to go wrong'** (ll. 28–29), and yet this poem-as-biography offers a few possibilities: Caroline marrying for money not love, her perhaps self-defeating sexual activities, her excessive drinking. In detailing what the poem cannot **'pinpoint'**, the narration knowingly outlines the demise of Caroline's happiness: **'her naïve, / excited arrivisme** [a negative term for the state of being newly rich] **was poisoned'** and **'the rural gentry still close ranks.'** Caroline failed to fully assimilate into the upper echelons of this county's society, and the military metaphor of **'close ranks'** likens her to an enemy force that has to be repelled. The stanza ends with the word **'reached'**, as if Caroline were reaching out but finding no end or answer.

Lines 33–36.

The alliterative **'menopause of misery'** connects Caroline's situation with her sex and age. If the milk going sour earlier was associated with her (bitter) experience of childcare, the ending of female fertility is now linked to the end of Caroline's life. This phrase accentuates the misogynistic attitudes shown toward Caroline by the villagers and, arguably, by the speaker of the poem themselves. It indicates that female reproductive capacity is linked to happiness, and Caroline has neither. A 'pathetic fallacy' is when the weather seems to mirror a character's mood in poem or a novel, and in this instance the **'mild July night'** also has **'fog'** and **'drizzle'**, suggesting that Caroline's mood is erratic, confused, and disorientated. The **'fifty-odd white pills'** might be linked to Caroline's age; she may be reflecting on the years of her life which have led to this point of crisis.

Lines 37–40.

The pills are **'gulped'** as the alcohol is **'swig[ged]'** (ll. 36–37), both active verbs suggesting an appetite that the speaker finds distasteful. Gin is a gendered drink, living up to its nickname of 'mother's ruin' in this poem. Gin is associated with both the upper and the lower classes, perhaps signalling how Caroline has traversed class boundaries over her life. The **'coroner and press and public'** are **'shocked'** by the details of Caroline's death, but exactly why is unclear. It could be due to the terrible circumstances that led to her death and her body lying undiscovered for a month, but the shock could also be a gossipy sensationalism that fixes on indecorous details like her dressing-gown.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The poem's narrator attempts to present Caroline's life in a dispassionate way – there are apparently no overt judgements about her behaviour or that of the community – but the partiality of the narrator's viewpoint can be discerned with some close reading. Perhaps the regular form is used to suggest that this is a traditional tale – one of patriarchal and class dominance over a less privileged female. In any case, Caroline being '**aflush**' and the reception being '**swank**' suggests a subtle mockery of her attempts to enter upper-class society as pretentious and superficial. However, when she is described as '**milk dribbling away to rennet**', it suggests that she was at least as fresh and pure as milk once. The reader's assessment of Caroline will depend on what ideas they bring to the poem – whether marrying for money is forgivable or not, what level of responsibility she has for her son being so distant, and so forth. But even if the reader has an initial opposition towards her character, they would likely be moved towards a more sympathetic position by the skilful way the sad details of her death are relayed by the speaker.

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 Caroline?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5 (links active May 2020)

All links are clickable

An image of Bush can be seen on his publisher's website:

serenbooks.com/author/duncan-bush

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

News article on the 'county set', 2 March 1998:

[independent.co.uk/news/county-set-bring-the-country-into-town-1147871.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/county-set-bring-the-country-into-town-1147871.html)

Duncan Bush's Obituary in *The Telegraph*, 30 January 2018:

[telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2018/01/30/duncan-bush-welsh-poet-obituary/](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2018/01/30/duncan-bush-welsh-poet-obituary/)

Profile of Bush by Robert Minhinnick:

[literaturewales.org/lw-news/duncan-bush-1946-2017/](https://www.literaturewales.org/lw-news/duncan-bush-1946-2017/)

FURTHER READING

Adams, Sam. 'Weaving a Cymric Web? A Perspective on Contemporary Anglo-Welsh Poetry', *Comparative Criticism*, 19 (Literary Devolution: Writing in Scotland, Ireland, Wales and England) (1997), 117-136.

Gregson, Ian. 'Transplanted (Duncan) Bush', *Poetry Wales*, 41/4 (2005), 16-21.

Owen-Griffiths, Meriel, ' "How arbitrary one's identity": The Construction of Cultural Identity in Contemporary Welsh Poetry in English' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, The University of Western Australia, Perth, 2010). Available at:

pdfs.semanticscholar.org/7d1a/0a23977c23d8ec1b0f4b6565e5f0b635d0f3.pdf

Minhinnick, Robert. 'Interview with Duncan Bush', *Poetry Wales* 38/2 (2002), 46-50.

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