

# 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'**.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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(1) Tristan Hughes, Wales Arts review News, *'EMYR HUMPHREYS (1919-2020) | TRIBUTE'*, 2020, [walesartsreview.org/emyr-humphreys-at-100](https://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](http://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](http://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](http://serenbooks.com/newsentry/tribute-emyr-humphreys)

You can find an article by Professor Wynn Thomas on Emyr Humphreys here. **NO LINK IN WORD DOC?**



# BIBLIOGRAPHY: FURTHER READING

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