

# From Father to Son

- by Emyr Humphreys -

## Activities

### A

Possible ideas to elicit from the use of this idiomatic phrase include: the sense of a gift passed from father to son, attributes and characteristics inherited from father to son, perhaps some kind of 'message' delivered from father to son.

Emyr Humphreys was born in 1919, just after the First World War had ended. His father was a schoolmaster who returned from the war injured and was an invalid for the rest of his life. The poem was one of eighteen published under the title *Ancestor Worship* in 1970. After an initial reading of the poem, learners may benefit from a discussion of these contextual factors: for example, the date of publication, long after the father's death, may be discussed with reference to the idea of memory in the poem. The title of the collection, *Ancestor Worship*, might also be a productive area for discussion as a route into the text. These ideas may be written down for reference later.

Please remember that context is not assessed in this piece.

### B

After consideration, highlight on screen the appropriate words in the text to highlight the two ideas of love and poverty.

Working with these ideas, learners should look for evidence of both in the first stanza. A close reading of the detail can be encouraged here: his coat 'buttoned to the throat', his face 'blue from the wind', for example. The use of specific words and phrases, rather than whole sentences, in discussing poetry can be taught to improve learners' critical style.

### C

Learners may react differently to the image as sinister/nightmarish or as pitiful/loving. Discussion of these differences may be productive ways of engaging with the text. Ideas for learners to consider include:

- the eagerness of the father 'driven... / To this encounter'
- the suggestion that he returns many times in 'There is no limit...'
- his apparent timidity and what this might suggest about him.

The use of the present tense may be considered as a reflection of the immediacy of the memory in the poet's mind.

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## D

Learners should consider how the poet creates an unexpected, deliberately uncomfortable view of an important figure in his life. A useful focus may be the need to provide detailed, specific evidence from the text to support learners' views. An understanding, tolerance and even enjoyment of ambiguity and different interpretations is an important element here too.

'He comes with all his winters and all his wounds.' The alliteration makes the line ring, investing it with more than surface meaning. Some suggestions may be elicited at this stage to encourage an interpretative approach.

Learners should look for other references to cold, suggested by 'winters', in the stanza. Also, the words 'wounds' and 'worn' add a different dimension to the portrayal which could be explored interpretatively. The description of the father as 'a tramp' and a 'shape' are evocative and surprising when remembering a loved one. Learners' reactions to these ideas could be discussed.

## E

With a very wide range of vocabulary in a poet's tool-kit, repetition of words is deliberate and learners should be encouraged to think about the effects created. In the first two stanzas, the word 'hesitant' is used twice, though it refers to the father in the first, the poet in the second. This might be used to consider whether some repeated words alter their meaning.

## F

Learners should attempt a concise summary of the stanza's content before considering its style. Building on previous activities, some of the following may be elicited:

- the repetition in the last two lines
- the evocation of the sense of touch
- the ending of the poem on the word 'love'
- the impact of specific words
- some critical recognition of the poet's characteristic style.

## G

A reflective, personal response to the poem as a whole should be encouraged here.

These Teachers' Notes, provided to support the teaching and learning of GCSE English Literature, contain some ideas which teachers could use to stimulate discussion and debate, in conjunction with other materials and sound classroom teaching. Context is not assessed in this non-examination assessment.