

Tony Curtis

'To My Father'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
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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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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.