

# Bryn Griffiths

## 'Dying at Pallau'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



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# CONTENTS

- 3 SECTION 1 :  
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 4 SECTION 2 :  
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 10 SECTION 3 :  
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 11 SECTION 4 :  
SIX QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 12 SECTION 5 :  
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 13 SECTION 6 :  
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

# BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

**(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)**

Bryn Griffiths was born in Swansea in 1933. At 17, he first went to sea, serving several years in the Merchant Navy, before studying at Coleg Harlech. He worked as a journalist, broadcaster and television scriptwriter in London, founding the Welsh Writers’ Guild in the 1960s alongside other writers including John Tripp and Sally Roberts. His first collection of poems, *The Mask of Pity*, published in 1966, was interested in the history and landscapes of Wales, particularly the lower Swansea Valley, devastated by the Industrial Revolution, and he edited the anthology *Welsh Voices* (1967). Other significant collections include *The Stones Remember* (1967), *Scars* (1969) and *The Survivors* (1971).

Griffiths subsequently lived for many years in Australia, and in 1985 was appointed writer-in-residence to the Australian Merchant Navy, spending further time at sea and writing a number of the poems collected in *Sea Poems* (1988). He received the Community Cultural Development Board’s 2004 Ros Bower Memorial Award for his commitment to the principle of giving all Australians the right to access the arts.

‘Dying at Pallau’ can be understood in the context of a number of other significant poems by Welsh writers, and in the context of some significant British poems that were written in the 1940s and 1950s. In the time it spends with a dying man it is reminiscent of the R. S. Thomas poem ‘Evans,’ while its use of weather to express the emotions of the poem’s subject is reminiscent both of ‘Wind’ by Ted Hughes and ‘All Day It Has Rained’ by Alun Lewis.

Another important context to consider is the representation of farming in Wales. The presentation of rural workers in poems by R. S. Thomas such as ‘The Airy Tomb’ is a useful resource here.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Title.

The title gives us, in an accessible fashion, the immediate subject of the poem. Pallau is a farm in north Pembrokeshire: the poet has chosen as his setting a place which is real and which is also slightly obscure and out-of-the-way. In choosing a real place, and in naming the man the poem describes as **'Tom Davies,'** we are very much given the sense of authenticity in this poem, of a real life ending, and this deepens the poem's emotional power. The other important thing about the title is its choice of present tense – **'Dying.'** There's a distinctive approach to elegy here, in that the poem focuses mostly on the time immediately before Tom's death and his dramatic suffering. Although we are told more than once that the events of the poem are in the past – **'I remember him now,'** **'I remember him that night'** – the poem also includes a number of echoes of the title's present tense: **'Lying,'** **'Praying,'** **'breathing,'** **'exploding,'** **'living.'** In this sense, Tom Davies is continuing to die whenever the reader comes to the poem, however long ago the actual death was, and this heightens the poem's drama. It also supports the sense in the poem's last lines of the house and **'the memory of his life'** living on: the poem, and even its deathly title, facilitates exactly that.

## Form.

The poem has a largely free verse form, with no real consistency of metre or line length, or of stanza form. One notable feature is that each stanza is framed as a single sentence, with ellipsis used as well as dashes to facilitate the evasion of a full stop until the end of the stanza. The poem of course is in essence an evasion of the end of its subject's life, focusing on the process of dying, as the title suggests, rather than on the death, so it is easy to see a parallel between subject and this formal choice. The long and complex sentences also give a sense of energy, sustained by some of the language choices: **'wild,'** **'rushing,'** **'spilled and ran,'** **'exploding,'** **'warring.'** It's a curiously energetic poem given the nature of its subject, and this both adds drama to the depiction of the man's suffering and substance to the concluding stanza's sense of the man living on.

The poem is also structured around repetition, with both stanzas one and three beginning with a version of **'I remember him.'** Stanza two, by contrast, begins with the man's name: the stanza gives the man the importance which the whole poem does. Another notable repetition is the word **'Beat'** at the start of lines four and five. Beginning these lines with this forceful stressed syllable again deepens the drama of the man's suffering.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Lines 1-8.

The opening line of the poem places the events it describes firmly in the past: **'I remember him now as he was then'**. There's a tension here with the present tense of the title and the way in which the poem's vivid imagery causes the reader to share Tom Davies's last hours with him. The fact that the first thing the poem tells us is that witnessing Tom Davies's last hours has stayed with the speaker both gives us a dramatic preparation for the events of the poem and contributes to the poem's concluding sense that the subject will live on. The use of first person in this opening and the sense that the events can be remembered establishes them as real, adding to the sense of authenticity which is created in the poem.

The weather on the night of the death is described with consistent drama, and can be seen as an example of pathetic fallacy, when the weather enacts the emotion of the poem. We are initially given a number of 'w' sounds, which perhaps enact the sound of the weather: **'wild' 'Wales,' 'when the wind'**. These give way to the plosive consonants of **'Beat'** at the start of lines five and six. The movement from the softer 'w' sound to the harsh 'b' sound increases the impact of the latter, exaggerating the sense of drama here to describe the weather and, by extension, the drama of the man's death. The alliterative 's' and 'sh' in **'surf,' 'rushing'** and **'trees'** onomatopoeically suggests the sound of wind. The vocabulary describing the weather is violent, which again is obviously a description both of the weather and of the man's experience: **'the wind stole breath and the bombing rain,' 'the drowned fields'**.

The farm in this poem, initially established in this first stanza, offers us an exposed setting, where **'the bombing rain/Beat against the farmhouse windows.'** Among the interesting things is that, while the poem's title is very specific in terms of place, by line three of the poem we have broadened out from **'Pallau'** to a **'wild night in Wales.'** This appears to make explicit the allegorical aspects of the poem, that Tom Davies and the farm at Pallau are representative of much wider forces in Welsh life.

These lines also have a number of images of violence which might be best understood in the context of World War Two: **'the bombing rain,' 'the rain exploding.'** The poet would have been eight years old at the time of the Blitz, and there certainly seem to be echoes of that Swansea experience in this imagery.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Lines 9-10.

The last two lines of the stanza make clear that this is an emotive family death-bed scene, the gravity of Tom Davies's situation resulting in a return of his children: **'And his children, come again to his side,/Praying away the waters of his death.'** This combination of religious and water imagery, and the power with which the weather is described, might remind us of the biblical image of the flood, heightening the elemental drama of this situation. It's perhaps interesting that the children are **'praying'** not **'crying,'** though a case can be made that a stanza which has been full of violent images and the aggression of the natural world does need to end with a forceful line like **'praying away the waters of his death.'**

The other aspect which might be worth considering in these lines is the extent to which the presence of the children might contribute to the symbolic way in which we can read this death. As we find out at the start of stanza two, the subject of the poem, Tom Davies, is inextricably linked with his farm: he is **'Tom Davies of Pallau: farmer and man'** and is farmer first, man second. He is a **'Deacon and teacher of the green and country crafts/To the changing children.'** While farming is central to his life then, it may not be to the next generation, who are **'changing'**: his own children have **'come again to his side'** to **'Pray...away the waters of his death'**. This might suggest that his children have grown away from the farm, returning only as a result of the threat to their father's life. Might the death of a farmer which this poem describes therefore be symbolic of changes in agriculture and of a generation moving away from the work of their parents – the wider death of a way of life?

## Lines 11-18.

This stanza opens by naming the person and the place. After the imagery and the drama of stanza one, there is a focus in the opening clauses here on factual information: **'Tom Davies of Pallau', 'Eighty-seven years'**. This factual tone very much allows us to see Tom Davies as a real person. This is important because it gives the poem emotional power, but it doesn't diminish the poem's ability to also establish Tom and his situation as representative of wider trends in Welsh life. While we can assume from the poem that Tom Davies is a real person who the poet has spent time with, it does no harm at all that his name is a common one. Just as R. S. Thomas writes about the suffering of 'Evans,' so the common name of the man here allows us all to connect with the experience.

The factual tone of the opening of the stanza gives way in line two to the metaphor, **'this cage of toil.'** The meaning here is open-ended. The **'cage of toil'** could be considered as the embodied life that Tom will soon be leaving, but it could also represent life on the farm or, by extension, life in Wales.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The first four lines of the stanza very much enlarge and expand Tom Davies as a figure, his roles, his significance, an impact generated by the multiple use of **'and'** and the multiple use of semi-colons to establish a list. He is **'farmer and man', 'Deacon and teacher of the green and country crafts/ To the changing children, growing into peace...'** Davies would not be limited in his life, those **'and's'** imply, and this sense is increased by that big number, **'Eighty-seven.'** At the end of line four, **'peace'** is followed not by a full stop but, fittingly, by an ellipsis: Davies's life was so expansive, the implication is, that it can't be housed in a traditional, limited sentence. This ellipsis also follows a reference to children - **'the changing children, growing into peace'** - enacting the sense of Davies's life going on after his death, because of his contribution to the next generation. Just as the sentence's end is not an ending, so Davies's death is not an ending: he continues to live on through the next generation. The life that will continue is a different one to the one Davies experienced, with the violence of stanza one, resonant of World War Two, giving way to the **'peace'** the children are **'growing into.'** There is perhaps an echo here of R. S. Thomas's idea in 'The Peasant' that the farmer is **'a winner of wars,'** battling with the elements as Davies does in this poem.

The expansiveness of the first four lines of this stanza, of Davies's life, is reversed in the second half of the stanza, with a focus on a weak body and on parts of that body. He is **'willow-thin'**, we are told, with **'all his death apparent/ In a hand's thin bone'**. The use of synecdoche is telling here as the whole of the man, the whole of the suffering, becomes focused on one part of the body, the process of dying reducing and reducing him. It's especially telling of course that it is the hand that is used to symbolise the failing strength, with all the work and usefulness of which it would once have been capable. It's also telling that he is described as **'willow-thin'**: just as the threat to him is described in stanza one as the way the wind **'Beat through the surf of rushing trees,'** so Davies's body is itself now described as tree-like.

The final three lines of the stanza are full of plosive sounds - **'apparent,' 'bone,' 'breathing,' 'pressure'** - and even more full of sibilant 's' sounds, in **'his,' 'hand's,' 'harshly,' 'pressure'** and **'years'**. These sounds seem to enact the difficulty of breathing which they describe.

## Lines 19-25.

The opening of the third stanza returns us to the poem's opening line, with the non-specific **'then'** in line one of the first stanza being replaced now with the very specific **'that night'**. This again leads us in the direction of being encouraged to share this specific experience with this man. The first word of the line, **'Aye,'** suggests the intimacy of the spoken voice, and cuts against the lyrical descriptions of the violence of the weather in the poem, to create the impression of a real speaker who is connecting directly with us. There appears to be an echo here of R. S. Thomas's approach in 'Cynddylan on a Tractor,' where a highly crafted poem using metaphor and rhyme begins with a very spoken **'Ah'**, connecting the reader directly to the speaker and the experience.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

This stanza also returns us to the imagery of the first stanza in the violence of the way the weather is described. The first stanza's **'bombing rain'** now becomes **'the rain exploding'**, contrasting the children **'growing into peace'** in stanza two. This power of the rain, and the **'vast echo/ Of the wind'** contrasts the weakness of Tom Davies's voice: **'whispered'** and **'barely heard'**. The man is seen as powerless in the face of the enormous destructive strength of the weather, and yet the **'room-reflecting window-panes'** would enlarge the place, perhaps intensifying his suffering by replicating his image. Such reproduction of this suffering is also a way of ensuring the man's survival of course, because this poem, too, represents that suffering: all those images of suffering from stanza two, such as **'the pressure of his farming years'** are still in our minds as we consider these reflections, and are further reminded of the suffering through the phrase **'as he slowly died.'** The poem allows him to continue to live, as surely as those window-panes copy the image of the room.

It's telling that what Davies **'whispered'** and what is **'barely heard'** is a **'Welsh greeting,'** and this opens up an allegorical reading that this poem is not just about the death of Davies or of a way of work but also about threats to a language that went along with it. While the poem's speaker is given a spoken **'Aye'**, the words of Davies are not given to us. This distances us from Davies and, if this is an allegory about the threats to a language, the fact that we don't get Davies's actual words would seem to enact this.

The last two lines of the stanza are built around an opposition which dramatizes and emphasises the man's dying, as we are told that **'the kindness'** is **'living'** (present tense) in his eyes, **'As he slowly died'** (past tense). **'The attic of his days'** is a really interesting image. Unlike the **'room-reflecting window-panes'** which reproduce the man's image, as this poem does, the reference to an attic carries a suggestion that dying puts your life away, stores you, makes you less public. Attics are often associated with the mind in literature (and Freudian symbolism) so there is a sense also of being stored away in the memory. The connection between the man and the place, the farm, has been there throughout the poem: when the man's name is introduced, he is **'Tom Davies of Pallau,'** while **'the creaking house'** seems to speak of his own age and physical weakness. If he is a house, then death is **'the attic'** of that house, and this may well be seen as an echo of the last stanza of Dylan Thomas's **'Fern Hill,'** another poem which explores the intimate connection between person and place. The final stanza of that poem offers the assertion that **'time would take me/ Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand.'**



# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Lines 26-28.

The last three lines of the poem return us to the first stanza, with nothing having changed, and yet everything having changed. The **'creaking house'** of stanza one is **'creaking still'** and the violent weather returns, again described with repeated 'w' sounds: **'the warring winds,' 'the weathers of Wales'**. Whereas these 'w' sounds moved towards the hard 'b' sounds of **'bombing rain'** and the repetition of **'Beat'** in stanza one, though, here they lead us to a harmonic mixture of half- and full- end rhyme: **'days,' 'Wales,' 'ways.'** As throughout the poem, the use of a phrase like **'all the weathers of Wales'** may be a way of enlarging the drama of the situation, but it could also be read as the situation in the poem being representative of wider aspects of national life.

The softer music of this stanza is apposite given the gentler meaning of these lines. The violence of the suffering the poem has described is gone. **'The old house'** which has become intimately linked with and representative of Tom Davies in the course of the poem **'lives on'** and it is **'imbued with the memory of his life and gentle ways.'** One thing which is interesting about this last line is the imprecision of its language - **'imbued,' 'memory'** and **'life'** are all very abstract and **'ways'** is quite non-specific. The absence of objects and concrete nouns makes this line difficult to visualise. One argument that can be made is that the imprecision here is consistent with a poem which has distanced us from its central character: we do not know the words of his Welsh greeting, would not be able to describe his face. But another argument is that the vagueness of this last line is the complete opposite of a number of the poem's earlier details, including a phrase like **'all his death apparent/ In a hand's thin bone.'** This is visual, visceral and concrete. An argument that can be made here then is that, just as suffering has reduced Tom Davies to parts of his body, so this last line of the poem seeks to expand him again, leaving things open-ended for him to continue to grow, rather than seeking to pin him down.

# COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'Dying at Pallau' is a poem which encourages us as readers to share the death of one man, Tom Davies. Although our attention is drawn to the fact that the speaker can remember the events the poem describes, allowing a distance from the events which is perhaps necessary so that the emotion of the poem does not become overwhelming, enough of the poem happens in the present tense, and there is enough physical detail of the man's suffering, to feel that the **'dying'** is happening now, whenever the reader reads the poem. The poem generates the sense that the events described really happened by naming the man and the place, and by the sense that the speaker can remember them. The ending conveys the sense that the man can live on because his house lives on: it's also true that he can live on because this poem has been written, allowing each new reader to share with Tom Davies the last hours of his life.

Key to the poem's strategies are the connection it establishes between the place and the person: he is **'Tom Davies of Pallau'** and the **'creaking house'** is therefore representative of him. Set against this is the threatening violence of the weather, which sets this poem in a tradition of pathetic fallacy which includes the storm in *King Lear*, which is again seen to be an external manifestation of the suffering of an old man. If Tom Davies doesn't match Lear's rage, he is similarly powerless.

One question which is worth asking about this poem is whether it seeks to eulogise one man or whether Tom Davies is symbolic of something larger, as well as being himself. Tom Davies is **'Deacon and teacher of the green and country crafts/ To the changing children, growing into peace...'** while Davies's own children have clearly gone away from the farming life, as they are now **'come again to his side.'** Davies is also eulogised here in an English-language poem, though he offers a **'Welsh greeting'**. The very act of choosing to eulogise someone in a poem must make them, to an extent, a representative figure: is Griffiths also eulogising a particular way of life, work or language?

Perhaps, though, the poem is more interested in one real death than it is in making Davies's experiences symbolic. For all the **'memory of his life and gentle ways'** that the poem's last line offers us, it's the close details of Davies's body which stay with us after reading, **'all his death apparent/In a hand's thin bone.'** The empathetic connection this poem gives each reader with a man they never met, and with his final suffering, hugely enriches us.

# SIX QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

- Why do you think the poet begins the poem, and later repeats, the idea that 'I remember him'? How does this framing device change the impact of the poem?
- How do you think Tom Davies would feel if he could read this poem? How might his children react?
- What sorts of things do you think Tom's children would do with their lives after their father's death? Do you think the Pallau farm is still in the family now?
- What relationship does the house have to what's going on with Tom? And what about the weather?
- What do you think of the ending's idea that Tom's memory will live on through the house? Does this convince you, or is it the poet's wishful thinking or self-comforting? Can Tom live on through this poem?
- Is this poem about Tom's death? Or everyone's?

# PHOTOGRAPHS



Photo by permission of Bryn Griffiths.

# LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

The author's own website, with a biography and bibliography: [blog.bryngriffiths.net](http://blog.bryngriffiths.net)

A press release regarding Bryn Griffiths's donation of papers to Swansea University, outlining his important connections in English-language poetry from Wales in the 1960s: [www-2018.swansea.ac.uk/press-office/news-archive/2015/swanseawriterpoetandmarinerdonatespaperstoswanseauniversity.php](http://www-2018.swansea.ac.uk/press-office/news-archive/2015/swanseawriterpoetandmarinerdonatespaperstoswanseauniversity.php)

'Wind' by Ted Hughes: [genius.com/Ted-hughes-wind-annotated](http://genius.com/Ted-hughes-wind-annotated)

Photographs and information about the impact of the Blitz on Swansea: [swansea.gov.uk/article/57405/The-Three-Nights-Blitz](http://swansea.gov.uk/article/57405/The-Three-Nights-Blitz)

'Welsh writing in English: Case studies in cultural interaction' by Gareth Ian Evans: [core.ac.uk/reader/161880577](http://core.ac.uk/reader/161880577)  
The thesis includes coverage of Bryn Griffiths's writing about Australia, and may provide useful background.

Information regarding Bryn Griffiths's work as an arts activist in Australia and its recognition there is available here: [australiacouncil.gov.au/news/media-centre/media-releases/writer-and-trade-unionist-wins-key-arts-prize-2/](http://australiacouncil.gov.au/news/media-centre/media-releases/writer-and-trade-unionist-wins-key-arts-prize-2/)

This article from *The Guardian* establishes Eglwysrwr, the nearest village to Pallau, as 'the UK's wettest village' - which given the content of this poem, is not without relevance! The article and pictures give a good sense of the community and part of the world in which the poem is set: [theguardian.com/global/2016/jan/17/welsh-village-hoping-to-become-kingdom-of-rains-with-ignoble-record](http://theguardian.com/global/2016/jan/17/welsh-village-hoping-to-become-kingdom-of-rains-with-ignoble-record)

**Pallau** is given in a list of historic placenames and the map gives the farm c.1900:

[historicplacenames.rcahmw.gov.uk/placenames/recordedname/be148015-9cc8-4976-82f5-fc35645133c8](http://historicplacenames.rcahmw.gov.uk/placenames/recordedname/be148015-9cc8-4976-82f5-fc35645133c8)



## Jonathan Edwards

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