CREW

Leslie Norris

‘His Father, Singing’

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

Swansea University
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(page 272–74 of *Poetry 1900–2000*)

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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.)

Award-winning poet and short story writer Leslie Norris was born at Wern Farm, just outside of Merthyr Tydfil, in 1921 and went on to live in both England and the US. Norris's youth was spent in Wales during the Great Depression[1] and his family did not have a lot of money. His father fought in World War One then became a coal miner. He lost his job after breaking his back, and then earnt a low wage as a milkman during a time when unemployment was at an all-time high.

Norris attended Cyfarthfa Grammar School and earned multiple awards for his academic and sporting achievements. Sport would play an important role throughout his life, chiefly soccer. He took after his father as a precocious student and vivacious reader, and the two would often recite poetry together. In his teens, Norris travelled to nearby towns listening to the poetry readings of Dylan Thomas and Vernon Watkins.

After a brief period in the RAF which resulted in a dismissal due to ill health, Norris decided to support his love of poetry by studying for a teaching degree, which he completed at Teacher Training College in Coventry. His wife, Kitty, was also a teacher. He later went on to teach in Yeovil and Bath before becoming a headteacher in Chichester. In 1973 Norris was invited to become a Visiting Professor and Poet at the University of Washington; this triggered his affinity with America and its rich landscape. By 1983 he had become a Professor of Poetry, and later of Creative Writing, at Brigham Young University in Utah.

Despite leaving Wales in 1948 when he was in his early twenties, Wales and its cultural heritage figured heavily in Norris's poetry and his short stories, as Stephens points out: 'it is to the Merthyr of his boyhood, economically depressed but socially vibrant, that he looked back',[2] making him an important poet of Wales as both the landscape and society were enmeshed in his work.

(1) BBC, 'Wales History: War and Depression', *BBC*, (2014). **bbc.co.uk/wales/history/sites/themes/guide/ch20_part2_war_and_depression.shtml**

(2) Meic Stephens, *Poetry 1900-2000 One Hundred Poets from Wales* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2007), p.254.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

An avid contributor to *Poetry Wales*, the national poetry magazine of Wales, selections of Norris's work include *Finding Gold* (1967), *Ransoms* (1970), *Mountains Polecats Pheasants* (1974), *Islands off Maine* (1977), *Water Voices* (1980), *Sequences* (1988) and *A Sea in the Desert* (1989). Norris won the Poetry Society's Alice Hunt Bartlett Prize in 1970; the David Higham Memorial Prize; the Katherine Mansfield Memorial Award and the Welsh Arts Council Senior Fiction Award. His success as a poet led to him becoming resident poet at Eton College, and in 1984 he was considered for the role of Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom, a post that later went to Ted Hughes.

Aside from visits for festivals and conferences, including the Hay Festival, Norris never returned permanently to Wales, despite having a second home there until 1989. Survived by his wife Kitty, Norris died at Provo, Utah on 6 April 2006.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.
The title of Leslie Norris's 'His Father, Singing' arouses many questions: why is the father singing? What is he singing?

The possessive pronoun '**His Father**' immediately evokes the father and son relationship, which becomes more pertinent as the poem develops. However, use of the third person is unsettled by the poem's opening line that uses the first-person possessive pronoun '**My father**', making it apparent that the speaker is referring to his own father. Despite this, the formal connotations attached to the noun '**father**' adds to the dislocation between father and son that has already been created using the third person in the title.

The act '**to sing**' has varied implications which relate to celebrations as well as funerals. However, given Norris's experiences of war, as well as those of his father's, it is likely that the poet was aware of the role of song in a soldier's life. For instance, song was often used to bolster morale as well as convey some of the horrors of the trench in a less threatening way for those living through it. In this way, '**to sing**' is a means of celebrating culture, commemorating the fallen and establishing a connection to Wales through the history of song. Given that Norris's poetry often contains traces of Wales, it should not escape us that the title also echoes the singing tradition of Wales and even its Welsh anthem, 'Land of my Fathers'.

Form.
The form of the poem is fourteen regular stanzas of four lines (quatrains), with irregular use of end-stopped and enjambed lines. There are also frequent and irregular use of the caesura throughout the poem, which creates a stop-start rhythm, possibly mirroring the intrusive way that the memories of war invade his father's daily life. This staccato rhythm creates a further detachment between father and son. It could also mirror the non-linear thought process of the speaker: he begins by contemplating the reason for his father's singing, before going forth into his father's childhood and wartime experiences, and then describing a very specific time when the father sang. The poem comes from the lyric genre, a 'fairly short poem, uttered by a single speaker, who expresses a state of mind or a process of perception, thought, and feeling',[1] and Norris reveals the poem's climactic epiphany through a child's process of perception, a child who, when speaking, is now presumably an adult.

(3) M.H.Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Boston, MA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), Eighth ed., p.153.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1–4.
The aforementioned shift from the title's third person to the first person places a strain on the father and son relationship, emphasising their possible detachment which elevates the significance of the epiphany at the end of the poem. The speaker then contemplates the reason for his father's singing using a declarative tone to suggest a degree of certainty. However, this is then juxtaposed with the adverb of probability '**perhaps**'. While sadness and poverty are certain, happiness is not and this is reinforced by the speaker's immediate qualification, '**but I'm not sure of that**'. A tone of uncertainty and/or confusion is therefore established by the speaker in this opening stanza.

This is the only stanza in the poem that includes no caesuras and enjambement which means there are no mid-line pauses or free flowing lines; it is also the only quatrain not to be interrupted by a full stop until the end of the stanza's closing line. Could Norris be mirroring the disintegrating mind of the father following his regimented experiences in war through the structural collapse of the poem? Having said this, Norris maintains the four-line stanzas throughout – perhaps to represent the consistent four-piece family that surround him?

Lines 5-11.
These lines place the father singing '**in the garden**', an outdoor domestic space where he can sing '**quietly**', perhaps so that nobody can hear him? The caesura in line six emphasises the quietness of his father, strengthening the climactic epiphany that occurs at the end of the poem through his father's raised voice. The father as a quiet figure is important as it conflicts with him raising his voice at the end of the poem, making the moment even more poignant. Norris uses the image of a wallflower and the superlative '**loved most**' to further characterise the speaker's father, given the idiomatic association of being a wallflower – referring to an introverted person.

Tradition becomes pertinent in these lines, with the mention of '**gillyflowers**', a word passed down from his mother. Norris's use of tradition augments the significance of both time and the past to convey the father's memories. These layers of time (his father's childhood within the speaker's childhood) show how a parent's actions and emotions leave a lasting imprint on their children.

Lines 12–17.
We discover that the songs are part of the father's past. This is demonstrated by the phrase '**before my time**', which recalls one of the key themes of the poem: the importance of an emotionally turbulent past in addition to memory. This significance is further emphasised by the line break between lines twelve and thirteen, which suspends the phrase '**a time**', at the end of the stanza. These songs were sung when his father was a boy alongside his '**musical brothers**'; this phrase holds familial implications. However, use of the noun '**boy**' conveys the innocence of his father's youth, alongside games, songs, and playing, which all have connotations of a carefree childhood.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 18–20.
These lines take on a sinister meaning whilst maintaining the childhood innocence of his father who is described as '**still a boy**' despite being either a teenager or young adult at the time of enlistment. However, the reference to the youthfulness of his father highlights a childhood which was to be broken by war, and the horrors therein. Also, the songs the speaker refer to in these lines are different to the ones referenced in the previous lines – as these are the ones his father sung '**More often**'.

The repetition of '**boy**' implies a continued youth which is juxtaposed by the phrase '**dying songs**'. The reference to '**French mud**' identifies these frequently-sung songs as those learned in the trenches of the western front during the First World War. The mud specifically evokes the horrors of death, decay and disease, as it becomes a synecdoche for the battlefield and/or the trenches, where these horrors took place. The marching songs and popular music of the war become '**dying songs**': a powerful expression of the boy's loss of innocence and perhaps a metaphor for those boys and men who lost their lives during the war. It also hints at the father's traumatic past which is important for our understanding of the ending of the poem.

Lines 21–25.
Stanza six returns to the domestic scene in which the speaker, his father and his younger brother are alone, the occasion on which, their father '**sang for us once only**'. The absent mother in these lines, away from the domestic space of the home, creates an even greater dislocation within the poem. The gentle alliterative '**lamp lit**' places greater emphasis on this one-off occasion, leading us to see its significance. The speaker then reflects on himself – reading at a young age – developing his knowledge and in some ways, this foreshadows the ending's epiphany moment, where he acquires the more personal and emotional knowledge about his father. The speaker's age is poignant, as there seems to be a cognitive shift underway. Seven is the age where one starts to become more aware of the wider world and to reassess one's place within it and to realise that one's parents might have other lives.[4] As such, the speaker may not wholly understand what is going on but he is old enough to intuit that it is something significant. The tension between age/youth and the theme of war could be about the effects on the generation of children raised by war veterans. The war continues to cast a shadow beyond 1918 and beyond the trenches.

The image of the '**scrubbed table**' possibly relates to the mother's temporary absence as typically, women were responsible for household chores during the time the poem may have been set. Her presence, yet absence here, could be a way of Norris ensuring that this intimate moment is not shared with the mother as it would be perceived differently by her, an adult – whereas a child's innocence is likely to interpret an adult's suffering in a different way.

(4) Psychology, 'Five-To-Seven Shift', *Psychology*, (2021), **psychology.iresearchnet.com/developmental-psychology/cognitive-development/five-to-seven-shift**

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 26–29.
This calm and quiet image of the child reading beneath a lamp is disturbed in these lines by the speaker's baby brother crying, emphasised by the consonance of '**cried from his crib**'. This cacophony of sound intrusively lifts the speaker's attention away from his peaceful reading. The physical pain experienced by his brother may foreshadow the emotional pain and anguish the speaker witnesses from his father.

The younger brother's brief '**peremptory squall**' intrudes on the peaceful scene created by the image of the speaker reading beneath a lamp. This could reflect how the grim experiences of war intrude on the father's everyday life. The '**squall**' is a prelude to the '**long wail**': this could mirror the humming of a lullaby as a prelude to the '**wail**' of the father's own voice '**raised [...] in pain and anger**'.

Lines 30–34.
The speaker now returns to the third person, referring to the baby as '**his peevish child**', and by doing so creates a detachment between himself and his previously mentioned '**my brother**'. The transition of the pronouns '**my**' to '**his**' is a reversal of the poem's title and opening line. These shifts in pronouns, whilst creating a sense of detachment, adds to the speaker's growing perception of the world and his surroundings.

The final line of stanza eight offers the paternal image of the father cradling his son '**in a wool shawl**'. This image shares associations with Wales, simply, its indirect reference to sheep, but also its links to the Welsh woollen industry and the tradition in Wales for blankets to be passed down between generations. However, the most important Welsh connection here is that of the Welsh nursing shawl, a practical item that enabled women to work whilst carrying their babies around with them.[5] However, in this all-male poem, Norris draws attention to how these Welsh cultural artefacts were also worn by men.[6]

It is also at this point in the poem where his father '**began to sing**'. Readers understand this to be a poignant moment between father and sons as stanza six revealed the boys had only heard him sing once. The father is now in the non-descript kitchen, an image which contrasts to later in the poem, yet Norris is reminding us that they are still within the confines of the domestic space.

(5) BBC, 'A History of the World: Welsh Nursing Shawls', *BBC*, (2014) Available at: **bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/objects/G7tAcrGyRZqNVZ3Y-i7DwQ**

(6) Carry My Cariad, 'Cwtching up in times gone by', *Carry My Cariad: Wraps, slings and cwtched-up things*, (2014), **carrymycariad.wordpress.com/2014/10/23/cwtching-up-in-times-gone-by**

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 35–40.
In stanza nine the father retains his quiet persona and begins to sing '**quietly**', mirroring the way he sung in the garden earlier in the poem. His father's quietness could allude to the fact that he does not say much, perhaps on account of his internal suffering? It also alludes to a widespread reluctance to discuss wartime experience. The use of parenthetic commas for '**of course**' emphasises the father's quietness, but also suggests that this was a well-known trait which is further accentuated by the repetition of '**quiet**' throughout the poem.

The speaker describes the way in which his brother becomes quiet in lines 38–40. Once again, he refers to '**my brother**': the return of the first person possessive pronoun is almost like a return to the equilibrium.

The fricative sound of the '**face**', '**fall**', and '**father**' is used to emphasise the sounds made by the quietening baby. The enjambment between lines 39 and 40 furthermore denote the gentle falling of his brother's head onto his father's chest.

Lines 40–42.
Following the silencing of his brother's cries, the speaker continues reading – fortifying his young mind with knowledge. The phrase '**died away**' refers to the quietening baby. However, the phrase's presence at the opening of stanza eleven, and when considered in isolation, adopts a darker meaning: many soldiers died away from their homes during World War One.

Lines 42–43.
The use of the caesura full stop in line 42 separates the speaker's two actions once the baby has quietened: he begins to read and almost immediately after beginning to read on, his head is raised by the sound of his father singing. We know from earlier in the poem that the speaker was familiar with his father's singing which suggests that there was something significant, or unfamiliar, about this particular song that made him look up. The suddenness is further conveyed by the absent determiner '**that**' between '**singing brought**' – perhaps the father's fragmented mind is being reflected in a breakdown of language within the poem.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 44–48.
We learn that he is no longer singing his '**wordless lullabies**' that that the father is merely vocalising to get the child back to sleep. One of the hallmarks of traditional lullabies is the rhyming which often creates a harmonious sound. Interestingly, the mood of the poem is further enhanced by the absence of rhyme which creates an additional connection to the emotional state of the father. The term '**wordless**' is also significant here because it holds connotations of not speaking, or not communicating. These were identified as key problems for World War One soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder (or PTSD).[7] Although, it is worth noting that by the end of the poem the father is communicating beyond speech via song.

By this point we are still not aware of why or what his father sings but the speaker has one aspect of certainty and that is that this singing '**was never meant for any infant's comfort**' and the comforting lullaby is '**gone**'. Here, we see the perceptiveness of the child in determining that the father's singing was inappropriate for a young child.

Lines 49–50.
By stanza thirteen the previously non-descript kitchen has become '**bleak**' reflecting the mood of the father. The child's cries have triggered the disturbed memories of war. These memories would include the pain, suffering and death, seen and experienced by soldiers. The crying has taken him to a place in his mind that has suddenly rendered the kitchen '**bleak**'; here, we see the invasion of wartime experience upon the domestic space. The word '**bleak**' is often likened to a barren landscape, echoing the wartime battlefield; the kitchen has now become a place where he is reliving these memories of war.

The description of his father in these lines has gone from a gentler and quieter figure to '**the stern, young man**' – use of the determiner '**the**' augments a greater separation between himself and his father. Furthermore, the mention that (with two children) the father is still '**young**' is another disturbing reminder of just how young soldiers were who served during the war. It is also a clue to the way the poem keeps two perspectives in play, i.e. the child and the adult speaker. The noun '**man**' is quite universal and /or impersonal, meaning that Norris may be attempting to convey how these experiences of war, and more specifically, cases of PTSD, were more common and widespread amongst soldiers.

(7) Benjamin Russell Butterworth, 'What World War I taught us about PTSD', *The Conversation*, (2018) **theconversation.com/what-world-war-i-taught-us-about-ptsd-105613**

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 51–53.
Up to this point, the father's voice has been described as '**quiet**' but here he raises his voice. The speaker uses a declarative tone when he describes the raising of his father's voice '**in pain and anger**'. This conveys the certainty and awareness felt by the speaker that there is more depth to why his father sings. Representing the father's state of mind, the words '**pain and anger**' do not offer readers any insight into the cause of pain, and, indeed, offer a generalised or naïve view into what might be causing the father pain.

The final stanza opens with '**sang**' which is immediately followed by a full stop. In a way, Norris's use of grammar is reflecting the isolation felt by the father.

Lines 53–56.
The speaker's unfamiliarity with his father's song at this point opens a range of interpretations. That the content or tune is unfamiliar, that the father is opening the door to hitherto unarticulated recollections of feelings, even that the '**song**' is a euphemism for tears (echoing the wail of the baby earlier). The tone of uncertainty that was established at the beginning of the poem has returned, just like the father's recurring memories of war.

Norris uses the fronted conjunction '**But**' to establish the father's outward manifestation of his internal suffering. The fear felt by the speaker at that point suggests a paralysis in the moment of epiphany. The '**fright**' once again reminds the reader of childhood innocence upon viewing his father in this way. Despite this, the moment he sees his father's anguish is pivotal in the development of their relationship as it enhances the speaker's understanding of his father. It is also pertinent for the development of the boy, as he is the witness to something unexplained, but his response is a mature wish to dignify, solemnify and acknowledge the occasion.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

At first glance the poem appears to suggest that a focal point might be the relationship between father and son. However, it soon becomes apparent that concepts of time, memory, and tradition are important in revealing the long-lasting effects of war.

'His Father, Singing' can also be viewed as a poem about the differences between the perceptions of an adult, who has experienced life, and a child, who primarily gains his understanding of the world through books. Despite the lack of understanding and ignorance voiced by the child (although now written from an adult's perspective as the poem is in the past tense), one aspect that does unite the two is a profound connection and reorganisation while being incomprehensible.

The significance of place is evident throughout the poem as a way of exploring tension between the comfort and intimate domestic space ('**garden, small bedroom, kitchen**') and the cold and callous space of the front. This enables Norris to depict the horrors of war through the trauma suggestively experienced by the father. The reference to France ('**French mud**') creates a physical distance but it is not enough for the father to escape the horrors of war. Towards the end of the poem, his mind is firmly under the control of his memories which are conveyed to readers and the speaker through his singing. Jarvis observantly mentions that Norris is 'a writer who is both in and out of place'[1] and this is certainly true of 'His Father, Singing', and I would add that in this poem, Norris is also in and out of time through a symbolic use of tradition which include language, industry, passing handmade blankets down generations, and the iconic Welsh nursing shawl.

The difficulties of communication and understanding the emotions of others seems to be a dominant motif in the poem. This is conveyed through the singing, crying, learned language from parents, and even the reference to a pigeon which has connotations of communication, specifically due to their usage during World War One. This motif creates a sense of irony as the father is unable to communicate his internal suffering. However, the manifestation of this suffering seems to be triggered by the child's physical suffering. In some ways, the father and child communicate unknowingly through their shared pain.

These types of suffering notably contrast. Furthermore, the physical pain of the child which is caused by teething – a natural process of infancy – is juxtaposed with the emotional pain of the father, caused by war – a man-made societal conflict. This natural and manmade juxtaposition is another feature of dislocation within the poem that seeks to convey the father's fragmented mindset.

(8) Matthew Jarvis, 'Leslie Norris, In and Out of Place', *Poetry Wales*, 42/2 (2006), 35-39.

FIVE QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

- How many possessive pronouns are there in the poem? What is their significance?
- How does Norris create a sense of connection or dislocation within the poem?
- The structure of the poem is fourteen regular stanzas of four lines (quatrains), with irregular use of end-stopped and enjambed lines. There is also frequent and irregular use of the caesura. With this in mind, how important is the structure of the poem?
- What is an epiphany? Can you identify an epiphany within the poem and how does the poet achieve this? What is more significant in this poem – the moment of epiphany experienced by the speaker, or mental anguish of the father?
- Is this a war poem?

SECTION 5
(links active July 2021)
All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

A photograph of Leslie Norris:
peoplescollection.wales/items/36368

SECTION 6
(links active June 2021)
All links are clickable

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Literary Worlds: An Exhibit of Leslie Norris's Life and Work **exhibits.lib.byu.edu/literaryworlds/norris.html**

The Royal Society of Literature: Leslie Norris **rsliterature.org/fellow/leslie-norris**

Mapping Literary Utah: Leslie Norris **mappingliteraryutah.org/utah-writers/leslie-norris**

'An Astonishing Life' – Poet Leslie Norris **deseret.com/2004/4/18/19823737/an-astonishing-life-151-poet-leslie-norris#leslie-norris-a-renown-poet-is-seen-here-when-he-was-6-with-his-younger-brother-eric-age-2**

Neil Aitken, Canadian poet and former undergraduate student of Leslie Norris, reads 'His Father, Singing'
youtube.com/watch?v=9baBfaPOa-k

Glyn Mathias on the working relationship between his father, Roland Mathias, and Leslie Norris
literaturewales.org/lw-blog/looking-back-the-genesis-of-the-roland-mathias-prize-for-poetry

Leslie Norris: Obituary **independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/leslie-norris-6104085.html**

The Welsh Nursing Shawl: **welshhat.wordpress.com/elements-of-welsh-costumes/shawl-siol/nursing-shawl-siol-magu**

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