CREW

Alun Rees

‘My Mother’s Mother’

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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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.)

Alun Rees was born in Merthyr Tydfil in 1937, and educated at Cardiff and Sheffield universities. He became a journalist in London in his twenties, working for local papers until he joined the *Sunday Telegraph* sports staff. Returning to Wales, he was a rugby and cricket writer with the *South Wales Echo* and *Western Mail*, and was named BT Welsh Sports Writer of the Year in 1998. His poem 'Taffy is a Welshman' was the inaugural winner of the Harri Webb Prize in 1988. He is a member of the Red Poets collective, and a contributor to their publications and readings. His collections of poetry are *My Name is Legend* (1962), *Release John Lucifer!* (1973), *Kicking Lou's Arse* (2004), *Yesterday's Tomorrow* (2005) and *Ballad of the Black Domain* (2021).

As a poet, Rees explores the radical history of Wales and gives voice to the marginalised. As Kate Jones puts it in her review of Rees's collection *Yesterday's Tomorrow*, his poetry expresses 'socialist ideals, attacks capitalism from a socialist perspective, [and] puts forward a socialist alternative.' The writing of Harri Webb and Mike Jenkins offers good context in which to understand Rees's work, and 'My Mother's Mother' can be read in this sense, as celebrating the life of '**Mrs Williams the fish-shop, next door to Zion**' – the sort of person that poetry often ignores.

Perhaps an even more useful context in which to read this poem is the nature of communities in the south Wales valleys, and the closeness of the people who live in them. These are communities in which people, as in Rees's poem, are frequently known by their profession and by where they live.

The final aspect of context worth bearing in mind in relation to this poem is the central position of the chapel in valleys villages and towns at the time Rees is writing about. For many places in the valleys, the Zion Baptist chapel was an important community hub, central to village life and routines, and Rees's poem sketches the way in which things have changed in its subject's lifetime: '**She could remember days when people meant it / to hail in song the power of Jesu's name**'.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.
This poem is a celebration of a grandmother, and it contrasts the speaker's loving memories of his grandmother, with the more superficial view of her held by 'the neighbours.' The title's personal pronoun therefore gives us the connection between speaker and subject. It is interesting that 'My Mother's Mother' is preferred to 'My Grandmother'. This is perhaps a way of making the poem's title more distinctive, the unusual phrasing grabbing us from the outset. There are two ways of reading the impact of this unusual title choice in terms of how it causes us to see the relationship between the speaker and the grandmother. One is that it could create distance between the speaker and the grandmother: 'my mother's mother' could seem like a less direct relationship than 'my grandmother.' Another way of reading this unusual title though, perhaps fitting with the close relationship between speaker and grandparent which is observable in the poem, is that it works to strengthen the connection between the speaker and the grandmother, by giving us also the connection they both share to the speaker's mother, placing the grandmother clearly in the strong matriarchal line.

Form.
'My Mother's Mother' is presented as a single stanza. The lines are not consistently metric, and the poem fits into no particular traditional form. This plainness feels right for the subject and intent of the poem. This is a celebration of a person from whom poetry has traditionally turned away; the poem as such turns away from the stronger traditional forms. The result is that the poem's language is accessible, not rendered awkward by an overly complex form. The poem is in part about what people say about each other, not what they *write* about each other: you can sense the spoken connections between people, how they talk about each other in a community in the first two lines, for example. A plainness of language and form seems useful to enact this.

While the poem doesn't aim for metrical consistency, there are lines which fit the model of iambic pentameter quite closely. Notably, these tend to coincide with places where the speaker is idealising the grandmother, the metrical strength of the lines well-matched to the romantic vision the speaker has of her: 'with **kind**ness **in** her **hands**. No **starv**ing **cat** /called **at** her **door** in **vain**, and **no** sun **shone** /with**out** the **gift** of **her** rare **hap**pi**ness**.' As in most lines of iambic pentameter, it is quite possible to spot the occasional conflict in these lines between spoken and metrical stress: we would probably stress '**called**' rather than '**at**' in speech at the start of line five for example, and '**rare**' rather than '**her**' in line six. But what is clear is that the metrical template is strongly there, whereas it is very difficult to identify in the poem's first line. Rees's form is sufficiently versatile, then, to allow him close rhythmic effects to enact the differing moods of sections of the poem.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The most significant formal feature of this poem is the repetition of the exact same line at the start and end. This has great impact. At the start of the poem, the subject is only '**Mrs Williams the fish-shop, next door to Zion**'. By the end, we know her as so much more – as someone special enough, indeed, to write a poem about. Repeating this first line at the end of the poem therefore allows emphasis to be given to the distance we have travelled in our understanding of this woman. This distance makes the last line emotive, and emphasises the achievement of Rees's poem, in transforming our perception of its subject in just eighteen lines.

Lines 1-6.
The poem's opening lines immediately set up a distinction between the neighbours, who remember Mrs Williams in one way, and the speaker, who remembers her with more detail. For the neighbours, she is 'Mrs Williams the fish-shop, next door to Zion'; for the speaker she is 'a small, thin woman / with kindness in her hands.' The neighbours' perception of Mrs Williams can be understood in terms of a tradition, widespread in the close communities of Wales, of naming people by their trades – Dai the fish, John the bread, Billy the taps and so on.

The way that Rees chooses to order these opening sentences is significant, giving us the more superficial perception of his grandmother first, in the first two lines, before problematising and elaborating on this: he sets up first a limited perception of Mrs Williams, to give his writing something to react to. The way that these first two sentences invert each other structurally is also subtle and interesting. The opening sentence gives us the perception of Mrs Williams first, in line one, followed by information on who holds this opinion ('**the neighbours**'), in line two. The second sentence starts with the person holding the opinion ('**I**') before moving on to how the speaker views the grandmother, in the second half of line three. This inversion at the level of sentence structure perhaps draws particular attention to the way that second sentence starts with 'I', giving priority and power to the speaker's opinion of the grandmother, as a result of the personal connection.

In lines 4-6 the grandmother is to some extent idealised, as we are told that '**No starving cat / called at her door in vain, and no sun shone / without the gift of her rare happiness.**' It is again worth looking at the way the poet orders things here, moving from the plain description of her as a '**small, thin woman,**' through the detail of the cat, to the much more superlative claim that the sentence ends with, '**no sun shone / without the gift of her rare happiness.**' We can read '**rare happiness**' here, not in the sense that the grandmother is rarely happy but that she is able to access a sort of happiness that not many people can – a special sort of happiness. The poet leads us then, step by step, away from the simplification of the poem's first line, to a much more aggrandizing position on his grandmother, the extravagant claims of lines five and six convincing us, because of this skilful ordering. Or *almost* convincing us, perhaps – even if this is an extravagant rather than realistic perception of Mrs Williams, this is of course understandable in the eyes of a loving grandchild.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 7-14.
Line seven again shows us the poet's skill in impactfully inverting sentence structures. The line is in some ways an inversion of line one: it communicates much of the same information. Now, though, it is not '**Mrs Williams**' who is defined by being '**next door to Zion,**' but rather '**Zion**' which is defined by being '**next door to her house.**' The power dynamic and the importance of Mrs Williams has now changed, justified by the praise the speaker has given her in lines 4-6.

Lines 9-11 show that Mrs Williams in the poem is not just herself; she points towards social change and the shrinking importance of the chapel in valleys communities, as the twentieth century moves towards its conclusion. The contrast in the language here shows the author's celebration of how significant chapels were in the past. The description of the past is expressed in celebratory vocabulary, such as '**hail in song**', and line eight is a perfect iambic pentameter: 'and **filled** with **sing**ing **on** a **Sun**day **night**.' By contrast, the situation *now* is given to us in much more downbeat vocabulary, in line eleven: '**grey stone building.**' This line is also much more metrically awkward: '**when Zion was more than the name of a grey stone building.**'

Line twelve returns us to the content of lines one and seven, reminding us that Mrs Williams lived next door to Zion, deepening the sense of this repetition being used as a structural device. Rees repeatedly gives us the simplistic community view of Mrs Williams, reducing her to where she lived, in order to drive forward the ways he can problematise this, expounding instead the real complexity of her life. This time, it is used to introduce the grandmother's final tragedy, as described in lines 13-14: '**when the final illness came it seemed / the singing filled her house, and she was glad.**' Again, as with lines 5-6, there's a willingness here to romanticise the grandmother and her experience, for the poem to present ideas and language which are worthy of her, and all of this is understandable, given that the poem is in the voice of a loving grandchild. Lines thirteen to fourteen are written in pretty much perfect iambic pentameter, giving us an elevation of language at the point of discussing the death: 'and **when** the **fi**nal **ill**ness **came** it **seemed** / the **sing**ing **filled** her **house**, and **she** was **glad**.' The notion that the singing from the chapel '**filled her house**' at the point of death is a romantic and elevated way of describing the '**final illness**,' or rather the escape from it to the memory of or imagined singing, and the comfort that offers, leading us effectively to the poem's conclusion.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

It might be worth considering the way in which links can be found between Rees's language here and the language of the Bible. Verses 4-6 of Psalm 23, for example, seem to be echoed in Rees's lines:

> 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
> 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
> 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Rees's language in these lines then, with their reference to the '**house**' being '**filled,**' seems to suggest that the grandmother is seeking spiritual comfort at the point of death. Similarly, John 8:56 reads 'Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad,' and Rees's language – '**she was glad**' – again seems to echo the Bible, enacting the grandmother's reaching for spiritual comfort at the darkest moment.

Lines 15-18.
Lines 15-17 do a great deal of work in terms of building up to the very last line of the poem, its repetition of the poem's opening line, and guiding us to read it in some rich and interesting ways. Line 15 begins with the word '**And**', suggesting that the poem's ending will continue in the grand and romantic style of lines 13-14. The expectation is built by line 16, another line which idealises and celebrates Mrs Williams, and which again has a strong relationship to iambic pentameter, to help elevate it. Moreover, line 17 concludes with a colon, setting up the final line to be a fitting culmination of all the celebration of the grandmother which has happened in lines 14-17.

Instead of a celebratory or elegiac line though, the last line gives us a repetition of the poem's first, apparently returning us to the simplistic opinion of Mrs Williams the community held. The repetition is downbeat, the line metrically awkward rather than sonorous, a possible disappointment rather than a culmination of the way we have been led to view Mrs Williams.

There are a number of ways to read this final line. The primary one seems to be that, by re-stating the first line, the poem shows us how far we've travelled in our perception of the grandmother, how problematic and superficial the judgement of '**the neighbours**' at the start now appears, how important the poem now seems. In emphasising how far we've travelled and how much we've come to understand Mrs Williams, the repetition generates real emotion. By the end, the notion that Mrs Williams is '**next door to Zion**' is more than just a description of where she lives, and is a phrase that is profound as well as prosaic. She is close to Zion, close to the promised land, in the spiritual dimension of her character and almost the holiness the poem has imbued her with.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

While this feels like the primary reading of the poem, a question worth asking is whether the community ever see Mrs Williams's full richness, or whether her full character is seen only by us and the grandchild-speaker. Line three begins '**I can recall,**' and it's difficult to establish, in lines 3-12, direct evidence to suggest that the community is aware of the richness in the way the grandchild is, or that they fully understand the aptness of their judgement of her. '**It is fitting,**' in line 15, then, can mean that the community's judgement of Mrs Williams showed full knowledge of all that she was. But it might be possible to read the judgement as fitting in ways that the community could never understand, which only the speaker and reader can access.

It is at least possible to see this, then, as a poem which contrasts familial understanding of people with the superficial ways in which people in a community know each other and yet don't know each other, however (perhaps accidentally) apt their impressions of each other might be. If this reading is pursued, it can bring an interesting aspect to the poem, because this then becomes a text which doesn't really celebrate the close connections between people in valleys communities, which is what these places are often noted for. Rather, the perception of '**the neighbours**' is seen as remaining superficial, and nowhere near the kind of nuanced love, understanding and celebration that family members are capable of.

The simplification of the neighbours' notions of Mrs Williams can be connected with the way the poem presents the erosion of the chapel as the hub of the community, the way that the chapel has become just '**a grey stone building.**' The grandmother's happiest memories are explicitly connected in the poem with a time when the chapel was a vibrant way of connecting people: '**the singing filled her house, and she was glad.**' Viewed in this way, the poem can be seen to mourn not just Mrs Williams, but a time of closely-connected valleys communities, made close by institutions such as the chapel.

The final line of the poem is therefore rich in ambiguity. The judgement it gives us on Mrs Williams is, as the poem says '**fitting**', in that she is intimately connected to the chapel and the sense of community it embodies – she is close to it in a spiritual as well as physical sense. That word '**fitting**' though can also be seen as ironic, and this has two impacts. If the final line does not follow from the nuanced celebration of Mrs Williams in the poem, the emotional impact of her death is brought home to us, by the gap between how the poem views her and how the final line does. The final line can also be seen as satirising the notion of close communities, suggesting that only familial connections really generate close relationships between people.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The richness of this last line, the way it points in several directions and, therefore, the reader's uncertainty in quite how to take it, is enacted by the distant half-rhyme of '**woman**' at the end of line 15 and '**Zion**' at the end of line 18. The half-rhyme further undermines the authority of the last line, leaving us on a moment of doubt. Yes, the woman and the chapel were physically close throughout her life, but that sonic awkwardness of the half-rhyme undermines the power of the last line's judgement on her, showing us, as the poem has, that there was so very much more.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'My Mother's Mother' is a poem of accessible language, in keeping with its intention of celebrating an 'ordinary person,' but it is rich and ambiguous in meaning. It is, firstly, a moving elegy for the speaker's grandmother, idealising her and expressing the grandchild's love for her: '**no sun shone /without the gift of her rare happiness.**' In her last days, we are told, '**when the final illness came it seemed / the singing filled her house,**' suggesting her spiritual connection with the chapel and the singers whom she seems to hear in her last days. The poem unpacks the resonance of an apparently superficial first line to show the significance of living next to Zion: Mrs Williams is spiritually reaching out towards the promised land through her religion, as well as dwelling next door to a building named Zion. In order to celebrate the grandmother, the poem pits the grandchild's nuanced understanding and idealised vision of her, against the superficial vision '**the neighbours**' seem to have of her, at least at the opening of the poem. The limitations of the neighbours' understanding enhance by contrast the depth of the speaker's love, creating a moving elegy. Familial connections matter, the poem seems to say, and to say this, it presents community connections, at least in the poem's opening, as shallow.

This sense of the poem is also connected to how it presents the Zion chapel. The chapel is presented as a place that was a community hub in the past. By connecting the grandmother with the chapel throughout the poem, her death can be seen as symbolic of the erosion of the position of the chapel at the heart of valleys communities, and the erosion of the strong connectedness of these communities, as the twentieth century draws to its end.

This reading of the poem as mourning the change in valleys communities which Mrs Williams has witnessed during her lifetime is problematised by one thing. The first and last lines of the poem, which are exposed as showing a limited understanding of Mrs Williams, are expressed in the voice of a quite old-fashioned community: '**Mrs Williams the fish-shop, next door to Zion.**' A question which is worth asking then is whether, rather than showing us that connectedness in valleys communities is dying in the latter half of the twentieth century, the poem is actually suggesting that such connectedness was never that strong at all. Certainly, it is not seen in the poem as anywhere near as strong as familial ties.

All of this is interesting in terms of Alun Rees's wider socialist poetry project. In its celebration of an 'ordinary' life, its willingness to make the subject of a poem out of the sort of person that poetry often ignores, 'My Mother's Mother' can be considered a left-wing poem. Yet in its celebration of religion, its nostalgia for a time when the chapel was '**filled with singing**', and in its questioning of the extent of community ties in the south Wales valleys, the poem shows that, while Rees may have a wider socialist project, he is not in any way a one-note or predictable writer.

FIVE QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

- How does the writer make this poem a moving elegy for a grandmother?
- How does the poet want us to read the final line?
- How do you think the grandmother might feel about this poem if she could read it?
- What opinion does the poem have of religion, and of the community in which Mrs Williams lived?
- Do you recognise the community Alun Rees describes in his poem? Do you feel community connections between people are stronger or weaker now than those Rees describes? Can you imagine or recall ways in which people are named in relation to jobs, places or landmarks?

PHOTOGRAPHS

Photo by permission of Alun Rees.

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

The poet's website, Taffy is a Welshman – The poetry of Alun Rees: **poetalunwilliamrees.wordpress.com**

An appreciative biography of the poet is available from the Red Poets website: **redpoets.org/alun-rees.html**

Reviews of Rees's collection *Yesterday's Tomorrow*:
socialismtoday.org/archive/94/poetry.html
poetryparc.wordpress.com/tag/alun-rees

Information about the Red Poets group, Red Poets – A History – Welsh Poetry Competition:
welshpoetry.co.uk/red-poets-a-history

Jonathan Edwards

Author of My Family and Other Superheroes *and* Gen *(Seren Books)*
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