

John Tripp

'Walnut Tree Forge'

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.)

John Tripp was born in Bargoed in 1927. His father was a farrier from Cornwall who moved to south Wales to find work after the First World War. In 1933, Paul and his wife Muriel moved the family down to the new housing estate in Whitchurch, Cardiff. Paul supported the family with his business, Oak Tree Forge in Taff's Well, which he ran until it was demolished to make way for the A470 bypass in 1969.

Although Oak Tree Forge bore the sign 'H.P. Tripp and Son: Smiths', John never worked at the family business. In stark contrast to his father's work as a skilled physical labourer, John spent most of his career working, in one way or another, with words. Leaving school aged 16 in 1943, he found work as a clerk with the BBC in Cardiff, and later, after three years of National Service, he moved to London. After another period at the BBC, he went on to work as a press assistant for the Indonesian Embassy, where he stayed for eleven years, before moving back to Cardiff to become a full-time freelance writer in 1969.

In the early 1960s, Tripp had met a group of Welsh writers living in London, later to become the 'Guild of Welsh Writers', and it was around this time that he became more aware of his roots in Wales and of Welsh politics. His first collection of poetry, *Diesel to Yesterday* (1966), was a biting critical view of contemporary Welsh society: in particular, its consumerist excesses, its pretensions, and what he viewed as the problem of Wales' relationship with England. He would pursue these themes over the course of several more books of poetry and prose essays until his early death, at home in his father's house in Whitchurch, in 1986.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

In the 1966 poem 'Diesel to Yesterday', Tripp memorably described himself as a 'modern who reeks of the museum'. Often in his writing, he contrasted the superficialities of the present day with images of an idealised past. In his later poetry, he became increasingly nostalgic, and looked back to his childhood as a source of solace, a time unspoiled by what he saw as the empty materialist excesses of modern life. 'Walnut Tree Forge' is one such poem from his last collection, *Passing Through* (1984). It recalls his experiences as a young boy at his father's smithy, watching his father at work.

The title is, on one level, an obvious reference to 'Oak Tree Forge', Tripp's father's smithy. However, its signifiers of natural imagery ('**Walnut Tree**') and a bygone working environment ('**Forge**') also signal the broader symbolism of the poem as a whole. Although written in the 1980s, the poem paints a vivid, pastoral picture of an older era, now largely lost, in which people were closer to the natural environment, and work, more often than not, involved physical labour.

Form.

The poem consists of four septets. These relatively long stanzas give the poem a bulky physical appearance on the page, each perhaps resembling the anvil on which his father would have worked his horseshoes, or the four hooves of the horses themselves. There is no regular rhythm or rhyme scheme, but the poem uses a range of prosodic devices throughout to convey its theme. It is phrased in an understated, everyday idiom, with only subtle lyrical embellishments. The poem also refrains from capitalising new lines: this is a technique Tripp uses in many of his poems to convey a sense of unpretentious informality.

Stanza 1, lines 1-7.

Although the poem takes the form of a memory of a day that passed many decades earlier, the use of the simple past tense in the first stanza creates a vivid sense of immediacy, as though the events occurred very recently.

Tripp was famously dismissive of what he viewed as the frivolous excesses of modern life, and this poem, with its emphasis on the physical nature of his father's work, presents a vision of authenticity and vitality in stark contrast with this. Lines 1 and 2 immediately set up an important distinction between the vitality of his father's occupation ('**My father shod horses**') and the perceived frivolity of the speaker's own life (though the poem is clearly autobiographical, the speaker is not necessarily Tripp himself). The speaker recalls his father hard at work at a traditional, physical trade, one strongly redolent of an older way of life, while he plays at a childish game.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The stanza also establishes the poem's symbolic connection between the physicality of the father's work and the dynamism of the natural environment. This is achieved through the image of the kingfisher. This is a striking image of physical vitality: the kingfisher, **'like a blue-green streak'** (line 4), bursts in and out of the water in its hunt for food. It is an image of graceful power, and Tripp uses enjambment, the sentence running across the lines, to convey the fluent physical movement of the bird as it darts **'clean[ly]'** in and out of the water. Like his father, the kingfisher sees the immediate fruits of its labour: it catches a fish and takes it back to its hole in the bank. The phrase **'fish-boned'** conveys a sense of the ongoing life-cycle of this natural environment.

Stanza 1, lines 8-14.

Like the first, this stanza begins with the words **'My father'**. Indeed, in the first lines of all four stanzas, the poet's father is focalised, serving to present him as the symbolic centre of the poem: filling the frame, so to speak. The repetition perhaps also emphasises the repetitive, physical nature of his work.

Lines 10-12 pursue the sense of the physicality of his father's labour, and the sheer strength and power necessary to do it. Again, enjambment is used to convey a sense of physical movement, with the sentence exceeding the confines of the ends of the lines, while line breaks emphasise words associated with labour: **'work', 'rest', 'back', 'heat', 'skill'** and **'rag'**. The stanza as a whole focuses on the image of his father's body in motion: he **'leans against the door', 'bend[s]', 'wipe[s] his brow'**. Again, his father is connected with the natural environment: through the **'big and restless'** horse he supports with his back, and in connection with the elegant kingfisher; he asks knowingly **'Did you see a kingfisher, then?'** Perhaps overcome by a sense of awe, the young Tripp cannot speak in reply, only nod.

Lines 15-21.

Here Tripp further hammers home the thematic contrast between authenticity and superficiality, figuring this through a distinction between two types of horse. As a farrier, Tripp's father would have spent much of his time making and repairing the shoes of 'draft' or working horses, those working on local farms, or in the coalmines of the south Wales valleys. This stanza makes clear that his father didn't enjoy working on horses bred for show or racing, rather than work. The images of strength and graceful power seen in stanzas 1 and 2 are contrasted with images of unwieldy heaviness (**'all rump'** and **'heavy'** only with the weight of the **'spoilt pride of their runners'**) and showy superficiality (**'cockade gloss'**). In contrast to working horses, the show horses are temperamental, **'spoilt'** and **'pampered'**.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Stanza 4, lines 22-28

Unlike the preceding stanzas, which foreground a sense of the physicality of the father's trade and the natural environment of which he is aware, the first four lines of the final stanza are slightly more detached and analytical. Tripp makes observations about what he has recalled, and draws conclusions about the difference between his fathers' experience of the day and his own, which hint at broader differences between their life experiences, and also, perhaps, political differences. If the driving force of the poem is Tripp's value judgement of the distance between the older era he recalls and the modern-day society he occupies, then lines 22-23 suggest his father would not have made such a distinction: **'It was labour to him, one more task / for a pound'**.

The speaker of the poem goes on to explain that for him, the days spent with his father were worth much more than money could buy: it was a **'golden time'**. The ironic connection between time and monetary value shows up the perceived worthlessness of money itself. The idea of the time spent with his father being **'freedom / from arithmetic'** has a similar double meaning, implying both time spent away from school, but also freedom from the money-driven adult society of which activities like arithmetic are a part. There is a note of melancholy in his realisation that this is time used up **'so easily'** (line 26), which further reinforces the sense that time has an unquantifiable emotional value.

The final three lines close the poem with a resounding nostalgic image that returns us to the uncorrupted idyll of the afternoon the poem is recalling. Whatever the differences between the speaker and his father, they are here pictured together, **'just the two of us'**. The penultimate line – **'the ring of the shoes hitting the pin'** – is a masterful phrase: the assonance of the repeated 'i' sound (ring, hitting, pin) resonates from the past into the present: like the memory itself. This runs on into the final line which is the poem's longest, suggesting the speaker does not want the memory to end, or that the memory lingers. The poem closes with the warmly nostalgic yet, again, melancholic image of **'the long-ago sun'**, sadly emphasising the distance between the speaker's present and this idyllic past.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

John Tripp was a poet with strong social and national convictions. Much of his poetry decries what he viewed as the excesses and superficialities of modern society. 'Walnut Tree Forge' explores these themes by recalling a memory of an idealised past: a day spent as a child at his father's forge.

The poem is set resolutely in the past. Though expressed as a memory of a day that passed many decades ago, it paints a vivid picture. The speaker's father is the symbolic focus of the poem: he is foregrounded in every stanza, and is constructed as the embodiment of an older era of authentic, skilled, physical labour. This work is, moreover, associated – almost conflated – with images of the natural environment: the father's physical skill and strength are connected to images of the vitality of that environment: the **'blue-green streak'** of a kingfisher; the **'big and restless'** shire horse. The effect is to conjure a sense of a social order more closely connected to the rhythms of the natural world. Such a sense is constructed in stark contrast to the world Tripp felt himself to inhabit, writing the poem in 1980s Wales. Indeed, in the complete absence of commentary on it, the present day is a palpable presence that haunts this poem.

Underlying the images of physical labour and the natural environment is a sense of melancholic nostalgia. In reality, Tripp's father's forge had been demolished to make way for a new road years before the poem was written. The new A470 bypass connected the city of Cardiff with the rest of Wales, heralding a new Welsh society and economy: one no longer built on physical labour or the natural environment. For Tripp, this represented a violent historical lurch forward, perhaps in the wrong direction. The poem, in its vivid, nostalgic depiction of a bygone era, embodies this sense of irrecoverable loss, as summed up in the lyrical final lines, which paint a memorable image of an idyllic childhood spent in **'the long-ago sun.'**

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What words and images does the speaker use to describe his father?
What is the emotional affect of these words?

What images of the natural environment can you find? How are these described?

How does the speaker describe the 'big horses/made for show'?
What values are being represented and critiqued here?

How important is nostalgia in this poem? What words are associated with nostalgia (a longing for the past)?

PHOTOGRAPHS



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<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/36361>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Poet Peter Finch recalls John Tripp:

<https://www.iwa.wales/click/2010/10/the-bare-essential-john-tripp/>

Draft/working horse:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Draft_horse#/media/File:Aa_shirehorse.jpg

Footage of a farrier at work:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZQ81i_HJ5o

Footage of horseshoe game:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHD_nG8uY1Y

Show horse:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/genewolf/5150843877>



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