

# How Welsh Short Stories Negotiate Identity through Language and Landscape: A Comparative Study of Dylan Thomas's "A Visit to Grandpa's" and "Old Garbo"

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Welsh short fiction has long been preoccupied with the intricate and often unstable nature of identity—an identity shaped as much by personal memory as by Wales's historically "fractured" cultural landscape, a theme repeatedly emphasised in lectures and explored in critical work on Welsh writing (Gramich, 2011; Smith, 2000). In Wales, where English and Welsh coexist in an uneven but interdependent relationship, linguistic difference becomes inseparable from questions of belonging and cultural memory. The nation's regional variety—from the industrial south to the rural west and north—further complicates identity formation, producing what Raymond Williams describes as a tension between "structures of feeling" shaped by different landscapes and histories (Williams, 1973, pp. 128–131). At the same time, the persistence of an oral tradition influences narrative rhythm, humour, and voice, allowing Welsh writers to articulate identities that emerge through storytelling itself (M. Wynn Thomas, 1992). Within this context, the short story form becomes an ideal vehicle for capturing the fleeting moments when identity is tested, reshaped, or imaginatively reconstructed.

Dylan Thomas's short fiction offers a particularly rich site for exploring these complexities. Though celebrated for lyricism and humour, Thomas is deeply attentive to the cultural pressures that shape Welsh experience. His stories draw the ordinary into moments of heightened perception, revealing how selfhood emerges from the interplay between place, memory, and language. Two stories from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (Penguin 2000)—"A Visit to Grandpa's" and "Old Garbo"—present contrasting but complementary visions of Welsh identity. The former is set in rural Carmarthenshire, its landscape tinged with eccentricity and mythic resonance, while the latter unfolds in urban Swansea, a space marked by adolescent performance and the influence of global modernity (Thomas, 2000, pp. 22–26, 65–70). Together, these stories illuminate Thomas's skill in using voice, humour, and setting to express the multiplicity and instability of Welsh identity.

Language in these stories operates on several levels: as everyday speech, as a marker of regional belonging, and as narrative performance. The cadences and comic exaggerations of Grandpa's voice evoke the imprint of Welsh oral tradition, even when the dialogue is written entirely in English (Thomas, 2000, p. 23). In contrast, the imitative performances of adolescents in "Old Garbo" reveal the pressures of an urban environment shaped by cinema, aspiration, and self-consciousness (Thomas, 2000, pp. 67–69). Landscape similarly shapes emotional and cultural identity. The farm becomes a repository of familial memory and communal sensibility, while the city streets function as a stage on which identity is performed rather than inherited. What emerges across the stories is a vision of identity as relational, dynamic, and continually negotiated—a process shaped by the shifting boundaries between Welshness and Anglicisation, rural memory and urban desire, childhood intimacy and adult reflection. Drawing on ideas discussed in lectures—such as Wales's status as a culturally "fractured" nation and the centrality of storytelling to Welsh expression—this essay argues that Thomas uses language and landscape not merely to depict Wales but to show how identity itself is formed, destabilised, and reimaged through these elements.

Welsh short fiction must be read with an awareness of the cultural tensions that shape Welsh identity, tensions foregrounded repeatedly in course lectures and widely discussed in criticism on Welsh writing (Gramich, 2011; M. Wynn Thomas, 1992). Wales is marked by a dual linguistic environment in which Welsh and English coexist in an uneven but deeply interdependent relationship, a condition that shapes the rhythms of speech, the patterns of storytelling, and the emotional tone of literary expression (Jenkins, 1997). The country's regional diversity—stretching from the industrialised valleys of the south to the rural expanses of the west and north—produces further layers of difference that complicate any singular understanding of national identity, echoing Raymond Williams's argument that Welsh culture is defined by overlapping "structures of feeling" informed by place, history, and class (Williams, 1973, pp. 128–131). At the same time, a long-standing oral tradition informs the narrative voice of many Welsh works, embedding humour, digression, and anecdote into the texture of storytelling, a feature repeatedly emphasised in Welsh literary scholarship (Smith, 2000). These intersecting elements contribute to a distinctive sense of being culturally "in-between," caught at the

intersection of languages, histories, and political forces, and literature becomes a space in which these uncertainties are examined and imaginatively reworked.

Because of this complexity, Welsh short stories frequently explore the ways language can both divide and connect. Language often marks class position, regional background, or cultural allegiance, functioning either as a gateway into communal belonging or as a reminder of alienation (Coupland & Thomas, 1990). Welsh speakers are sometimes portrayed as carrying a deeper connection to the nation's historical memory, while English-speaking characters may occupy a more ambiguous cultural position—a tension reflected in Thomas's work through rhythm, tone, and comic inflection even when he writes entirely in English (Thomas, 2000, pp. 22–23). The linguistic world of Welsh fiction is therefore never neutral; it becomes a medium through which identity is questioned, reinforced, or unsettled. Thomas's stories participate in this pattern but also complicate it by focusing less on explicit language conflict and more on how characters use speech to negotiate power, belonging, and imagination in everyday situations.

Landscape plays an equally significant role. In lectures and critical texts, the Welsh landscape is repeatedly described as more than a physical setting: it acts as a symbolic field through which questions of tradition, belonging, and modernity are staged (Morgan, 2018). Rural landscapes evoke continuity, communal memory, and the emotional weight of ancestry, while urban or industrial spaces tend to suggest mobility, aspiration, and displacement. The farms, small towns, and shifting city streets in Thomas's stories operate symbolically and psychologically, shaping how characters understand their place in the world and how they imagine themselves in relation to others. Thomas's depictions of Carmarthenshire farms and Swansea streets exemplify what Dai Smith calls Wales's "hidden geographies of feeling," in which personal identity is inseparable from the landscapes that sustain or unsettle it (Smith, 1999, p. 44). Even when Thomas does not name specific locations in exhaustive detail, the emotional charge of his settings signals that place is never incidental.

Underlying these elements is the notion—described in class and repeatedly in Welsh cultural criticism—that Wales may be understood as "one of the most fractured countries," its identity inherently ambivalent and internally divided (Day, 2002). Welsh fiction often depicts generational

tensions, movements between rural origins and urban destinations, and conflicts between nostalgia for an older way of life and the pressures of modern British culture. These fractures are not treated as purely negative; rather, they generate the creative and narrative energy that propels much twentieth-century Welsh writing (M. Wynn Thomas, 1992). Thomas himself is particularly attuned to the humour, melancholy, and imaginative possibility that arise from these cultural tensions, and his short stories condense these broader dynamics into small, vivid narrative worlds.

The short story becomes an especially appropriate form for representing such questions, precisely because of its compression and intensity. Its brevity allows writers to capture fleeting encounters, moments of self-awareness, and subtle shifts in perception—instances in which characters confront the complexities of their linguistic, familial, or cultural identities (Head, 2016). In Thomas's case, the form also allows him to juxtapose sharply different tones and settings within a single volume, inviting comparative readings between rural and urban, comic and wistful, memory and performance. Within this framework, "A Visit to Grandpa's" and "Old Garbo" can be read as miniature studies in Welsh identity formation. The former uses rural eccentricity, familial storytelling, and childhood memory to explore continuity and mythic connection to landscape, while the latter charts the uncertainties of an adolescent negotiating urban modernity, social performance, and the desire to refashion himself through borrowed voices (Thomas, 2000, pp. 65–70). Together, they show that identity in Welsh writing is rarely presented as stable or inherited; instead, it is shaped through an ongoing negotiation between language and place, memory and aspiration.

Language in Welsh writing is never a neutral medium but a charged site of cultural memory, social tension, and the ongoing negotiation of identity, a point made consistently in Welsh literary scholarship (Gramich, 2011; M. Wynn Thomas, 1992). This dynamic is particularly evident in Dylan Thomas's short fiction, where language functions simultaneously as everyday communication, as a marker of regional affiliation, and as a medium through which characters perform or contest their place within Welsh society. In both "A Visit to Grandpa's" and "Old Garbo," Thomas employs miscommunication, exaggerated rhythms, shifting tones, and the interplay between spoken and narrative voices to illuminate how identity is shaped, challenged, and imaginatively constructed.

In “A Visit to Grandpa’s,” the linguistic environment is grounded in the idioms and cadences of rural Carmarthenshire. Although Grandpa does not speak Welsh, his English carries the imprint of Welsh oral tradition through long, looping sentences, comic digressions, and the tonal blend of eccentricity and authority (Thomas, 2000, pp. 22–24). His repeated insistence on impossible facts—such as claiming that it is Saturday when it is not, or that he is about to be hanged for obscure reasons—functions as a kind of playful defiance. This mode of storytelling reflects what critics identify as the “performance of Welshness,” in which identity is enacted through humour, rhythmic narration, and communal voice (Jenkins, 1997). Grandpa inhabits a world structured not by official or clock time but by the rhythms of local custom, producing a linguistic landscape that resists the rationality of English modernity. His speech becomes a declaration of identity—valuing invention over accuracy, local rhythm over imposed order—and his exaggerations make him both ridiculous and oddly dignified.

Miscommunication in this story is not failure but cultural expression. When Grandpa claims that soldiers are “after him” or that he has been “sentenced to be hanged” (Thomas, 2000, p. 25), these exaggerations align him with a long Welsh comic tradition where the marginalised adopt heroic or absurd postures to reclaim agency (Smith, 1999). At one level the child narrator and the reader recognise these statements as patently untrue; at another level they function as a fantasy strategy for transforming powerlessness into narrative control. Language becomes a theatrical space where power relations are inverted and individuality asserted. Meanwhile, the child narrator occupies a transitional linguistic position. His voice blends literary polish with sensory immediacy, creating a liminal perspective that embodies the temporal layering Raymond Williams describes in Welsh cultural memory (Williams, 1973). This double vision—both inside and outside the scene—captures the fluidity of identity formed across shifting experiences of time, place, and voice, as the adult writer revisits the linguistic world that shaped him.

If language in “A Visit to Grandpa’s” expresses rootedness and communal belonging, “Old Garbo” presents a very different linguistic dynamic, one shaped by aspiration, insecurity, and performance in an urbanising Swansea. Here, language becomes social currency. The adolescents imitate film stars, adopt affected tones, and emulate Greta Garbo, revealing their desire to transcend provincial limitations and align themselves with cosmopolitan cultural currents (Thomas, 2000, pp. 66–68). Even

the story's title signals this impulse to rename and reframe the ordinary—"Old Garbo" marks a local figure through a glamorous borrowed label. This tendency mirrors observations in Welsh cultural studies that urban Welsh identity is often hybrid, shaped by external influences such as English media and American cinema (Day, 2002). Instead of affirming inherited identity, language becomes a tool of reinvention, masking origins perceived as ordinary or restrictive.

Imitation becomes a strategy for navigating social hierarchies and adolescent self-doubt. The narrator's self-conscious attempts at sophistication—his rehearsed lines, his anxiously controlled gestures—expose the fragility of his identity work. Unlike Grandpa—whose voice expresses confidence rooted in community—the boys of Swansea manipulate language in an effort to belong to a broader imagined world. Their speech reflects an internalisation of English and American cultural prestige, demonstrating how desire produces hybrid, uncertain forms of Welsh identity (Morgan, 2018). In this setting, linguistic aspiration reveals both possibility and anxiety: the more they perform borrowed sophistication, the more they risk exposing their own insecurity.

Across both stories, Thomas crafts narrative voices that blend humour, lyricism, and intimacy, reinforcing the idea—emphasised in lectures and scholarship—that the Welsh short story form negotiates the pressure of modernity against the weight of inherited cultural forms (Head, 2016). Humour becomes a crucial means of navigating cultural tension. Rather than functioning as decorative relief, humour enables characters to assert distinction, ease emotional strain, and retain dignity in marginal or uncertain social positions. This technique is central to the Welsh oral tradition, where storytelling functions as cultural survival and self-articulation (Coupland & Thomas, 1990). Thomas's prose incorporates the hallmarks of orality—colloquial phrasing, repetition, digression—suggesting that storytelling is both inheritance and identity-making. Even the narrators' retrospective voices feel as though they are speaking to an implied listener, maintaining the intimacy and immediacy of oral narration within written form.

The contrast between the linguistic worlds of the two stories underscores how different environments shape different modes of identity formation. In the rural setting, language affirms continuity, linking individuals to community and memory. Grandpa's speech anchors the narrator in a particular Welsh

rural ethos, even as it puzzles or frustrates outsiders. In the urban setting, language becomes aspirational and performative, reflecting modern pressures and the desire for transformation. The boys' self-conscious dialogue in "Old Garbo" is full of gaps, hesitations, and attempts to impress; it reveals less who they are than who they wish to be. Through these modes, Thomas demonstrates that linguistic identity in Wales is not fixed but continuously negotiated, oscillating between authenticity and performance, intimacy and display.

Landscape in these stories operates in similarly dynamic ways. Far from serving as backdrop, place becomes an active presence shaping emotional experience and cultural identity. This reflects a major theme in Welsh writing, where landscape is understood as layered with symbolic, historical, and psychological resonance (Gramich, 2011). Thomas's depictions of Carmarthenshire and Swansea reveal distinct modes of identity formation available within each environment, capturing the tensions between rural myth, linguistic heritage, industrial transformation, and the marginality that shapes Welsh cultural life (Smith, 1999).

In "A Visit to Grandpa's," the rural landscape is inseparable from memory and imagination. The narrator's childhood perspective transforms fields, hills, and farm buildings into spaces that feel alive, exaggerated, and slightly enchanted. Critics note that Welsh rural landscapes often function as extensions of personality and emotional history (Morgan, 2018), and Thomas's description of Grandpa's farm exemplifies this. Its crooked paths and unpredictable animals mirror Grandpa's eccentricity, creating a landscape that resists linear structure and rational order. Here, identity forms in relation to a place that exists outside modern pressures and inside communal storytelling. The farm seems to exist in a different temporal register, where past and present intermingle, and where the boy's perception turns ordinary details into scenes of adventure or threat.

Urban Swansea produces a contrasting form of identity. As Dai Smith argues, Welsh cities often generate "fragmented geographies of feeling" tied to visibility, aspiration, and performance (Smith, 1999, p. 44). In "Old Garbo," cinemas, cafés, and streets become stages where young people experiment with selfhood. The glow of lights and the reflective surfaces of the city amplify the narrator's desire to appear worldly, but they also expose his provincial insecurity. He is constantly

aware of how he might appear to others, and the city intensifies this awareness. The urban environment's instability mirrors the adolescent's shifting sense of self: it is full of possibility, yet offers no secure ground on which identity can rest.

Despite their differences, both landscapes externalise emotional states: the rural setting mirrors imaginative expansiveness and continuity; the urban setting reflects fragmentation and desire. These contrasting emotional geographies demonstrate that identity in Welsh writing is shaped by movement across landscapes as much as by individual psychology. Thomas suggests that Welsh identity emerges through constant negotiation between belonging and aspiration, heritage and modernity, rootedness and reinvention. When placed alongside language, landscape helps reveal a fuller picture of identity as something created through memory, voice, and embodied experience. In Thomas's stories, identity is not static but forged through dynamic interaction between the landscapes characters inhabit and the voices through which they speak and imagine themselves.

Dylan Thomas's "A Visit to Grandpa's" and "Old Garbo" together construct a vision of Welsh identity that resists any singular or monolithic definition. Instead, identity emerges as something lived, felt, remembered, and continually reshaped through one's relationship with language and landscape—a view consistent with critical understandings of Welsh cultural expression as inherently hybrid and negotiated (Gramich, 2011; M. Wynn Thomas, 1992). The characters in these stories inhabit a world where selfhood is not inherited in a straightforward manner but assembled from fragments of memory, communal belonging, aspiration, and performance. Through humour, sensory detail, and shifting narrative tone, Thomas demonstrates that identity in Wales functions as a dynamic process rather than a fixed state, reflecting the relational nature of selfhood described by cultural theorists of Wales such as Williams (1973).

Language forms a central element in this negotiation. In the rural setting of "A Visit to Grandpa's," speech operates as cultural continuity. Grandpa's eccentric talk—marked by exaggeration, mischief, and rhythmic digression—constitutes a kind of resistance to external authority and rationalised time, affirming a worldview grounded in local memory and oral tradition (Thomas, 2000, pp. 22–26). This echoes the argument that Welsh oral storytelling functions as a crucial repository of communal identity

(Jenkins, 1997). The narrator's recollections show language functioning as a bridge between childhood intimacy and adult interpretation, embodying the temporally layered structure that Williams identifies as characteristic of Welsh cultural memory (Williams, 1973). Through remembered speech, the past continues to resonate in the present, showing how identity persists through lived and retold experience.

In contrast, the linguistic world of "Old Garbo" reveals the vulnerabilities and uncertainties associated with urban modernity. Here, language is aspirational rather than rooted. The boys' imitations of cinematic voices and borrowed accents reveal their desire to inhabit identities larger than those available within Swansea, aligning with Day's observation that Welsh urban identity is frequently shaped through external cultural imports (Day, 2002). Yet these performances also expose fragility: each adopted phrase highlights the gap between the self as it is and the self as imagined. Thomas's depiction of this tension illustrates how global media—especially English-language film culture—complicates or destabilises local forms of Welshness (Morgan, 2018). Thus, linguistic performance in the city becomes both a site of imaginative possibility and a mirror of adolescent insecurity.

Landscape exerts a similarly formative influence, shaping characters' emotions and self-perception. The rural Carmarthenshire of "A Visit to Grandpa's" is not simply a backdrop but a lived geography saturated with memory, eccentricity, and familial belonging. Its crooked paths, animal routines, and sensory textures reflect a version of Wales associated with continuity, intimacy, and mythic resonance (Morgan, 2018; Smith, 1999). The landscape speaks through Grandpa's behaviour and the narrator's memories, embodying what critics describe as the deep interrelation between Welsh place and Welsh story (Gramich, 2011). Swansea in "Old Garbo," by contrast, produces a sense of movement, fragmentation, and visibility. Its cinemas, cafés, and streets constitute what Dai Smith has described as the "restless geography" of Welsh urban life, where identity is shaped by exposure, performance, and aspiration (Smith, 1999). The glow of cinema lights and reflective surfaces amplify the narrator's desire to appear worldly while simultaneously accentuating his insecurity. The city becomes a metaphor for Wales's shifting cultural conditions—restless, outward-looking, and shaped by global forces.

When read together, these stories reveal that Welsh identity in Thomas's work is best understood as a form of ongoing negotiation. The rural and the urban, the remembered and the desired, the stable and the performative coexist in dynamic tension—echoing the broader argument that Wales itself exists in a state of cultural fracture and hybridity (M. Wynn Thomas, 1992). These negotiations generate humour, creativity, and self-awareness rather than cultural fragmentation alone. The very contradictions that define Welsh experience—linguistic duality, geographical diversity, historical marginality—become sources of narrative richness and emotional depth. Ultimately, Thomas's short fiction suggests that identity is fashioned through an interplay between the stories people inherit and the stories they attempt to create for themselves. Whether grounded in the familial irregularities of a Carmarthenshire farm or the shimmering ambiguities of a Swansea street, identity is portrayed as something made rather than merely given. Through lyrical evocations of place and sensitive attention to voice, Thomas offers a portrait of Wales that is deeply rooted yet attuned to change, intimate yet expansive, local yet open to the world beyond. This delicate balance—between tradition and reinvention—is where his characters, and perhaps Wales itself, discover who they are.

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