CREW

Dannie Abse

'A Night Out'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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(page 313–4 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.)

Dannie Abse (1923–2014) was born and grew up in Cardiff to a Jewish family. He attended a Catholic secondary school before studying medicine at the Welsh National School of Medicine in Cardiff and later at King's College London, where he qualified in 1950. He practiced as a chest doctor, and, having married his wife, Joan Mercer, in 1947, lived with her and their children in London for the entirety of his career. Nevertheless, Abse maintained strong connections with Wales through extended family, friends, his writing, and his love of Cardiff City FC. Later in life, he spent much time at his second home in Ogmore-by-Sea.

In addition to a successful medical career, Abse was a prolific writer of poetry, prose and drama. He started writing as a teenager, having been exposed to politics and ideas by his older brother Leo (who was later a prominent Labour MP). He was particularly influenced by Stephen Spender's and John Lehmann's *Poems for Spain*, an influential anthology about the Spanish Civil War, published in 1939, which contained some of the leading poets and thinkers of the day, including W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice and Margot Heinemann. Although a secular Jew, the events of the Second World War profoundly affected Abse: he later said that 'Auschwitz made me more of a Jew than Moses ever did.'[1] Against the backdrop of the jaded cynicism of much post-war English- language poetry, Abse's is a sensitive, urbane, cosmopolitan voice, with a deep concern with international history and politics and their impact on everyday life and lived experience. Also, unlike many Welsh poets of his era, growing up in Cardiff and later living in London, Abse's urban lifestyle made him notably uninterested in matters of the natural world and environment, and more concerned with the ironies and complexities of modern urban life.

(1) Meic Stephens, *The New Companion to the Literature of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), p. 4.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

Abse's enduring popularity as a poet is perhaps partly due to his unpretentious style. This was one of the features he did share with his contemporaries in English 'Movement' poetry, such as Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin: an unembellished, almost conversational tone and diction. Often, this ostensible simplicity and directness of form belied a deep, oblique emotional and thematic complexity simmering beneath the surface. This is particularly the case with 'A Night Out', a poem from his 1968 collection *A Small Desperation*. The title refers rather off-handedly to a night out at the cinema with his wife Joan: the use of the indefinite article suggests this could be a night on the town like any other. However, the cool matter-of-factness of the phrase ironically disguises the chilling significance of this night in particular.

Form.

'A Night Out' recalls an evening in which Abse and his wife visit the cinema to watch a Polish war film about Auschwitz. (Though it is not named, the film is almost certainly *Pasażerka* (Passenger), dir. Andrzej Munk, 1963.) The poem is stylistically restrained: that is, not embellished with overt lyrical or poetic elaborations. Instead, and in contrast with the emotional charge of the subject matter, Abse maintains a coolly detached lyrical voice throughout. The poem makes no recourse to melodramatic or hyperbolic diction or stylisation. This is particularly significant given that Abse was himself of Jewish heritage, and later wrote that the film had 'assaulted' him.[2] It is worth quoting Abse himself on this at length:

> I quit that cinema in London's Oxford Street in an undefined rage and needed, soon after, to write a poem about the experience. Such was the charge of my emotion that rightly or wrongly I felt that I did not wish to make any pretty artifice out of it. I did not want to be lyrical about such a theme. I wanted to be as truthful as possible, to avoid all kinds of artificiality, to say what I felt and to say it plainly. I wanted the verisimilitude of prose – and so wanting that I used rhythms associated with prose and of course, as prose writers do, I eschewed rhyme.[3]

The poem contains three stanzas of equal length. In addition to its prose-like language, the form gives the poem almost the structure of a short story, with a beginning, middle and end: the before, during and after the screening of the film. The only concession to overt poetic stylisation is the fact that each stanza contains eleven lines: an unusual stanzaic form, but perhaps a reference to the 'eleventh hour' from the Biblical Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard.[4]

(2) Dannie Abse, 'Rhyme', in Cary Archard (ed.), *Dannie Abse: A Sourcebook* (Bridgend: Seren, 2009), p. 43.
(3) Dannie Abse, 'Rhyme', p. 43.
(4) King James Bible, Matthew 20:1–16.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1–11.

In contrast to the enormity of the poem's theme, its opening phrasing is notably informal and unceremonious, having the tone of someone recounting an anecdote: **'Friends recommended the new Polish film / at the Academy in Oxford Street.'** That said, despite the understated tone, the shortened, clipped sentences suggest that the speaker is uneasy about continuing. The lines create a mood of anticipation and apprehension of what is to come: indeed, like the **'wind'**, they offer **'faint suggestions'**, subtle allusions and echoes of the poem's dreadful theme. It is worth noting that the **'Academy'** was a well-known arthouse cinema in Soho, and reference to a visit there would imply a viewing of an artistically important or critically acclaimed film, rather than popular escapism. Moreover, the cinema was situated on the corner where Oxford Street meets Poland Street, an area of Polish Protestant refuge after the Polish Counter-reformation of the eighteenth century: a reference that sets up a parallel with the experience of Jews fleeing Germany during the Second World War. The speaker observes the **'ever melancholy queue'** outside the cinemas of Soho. The image of people queuing to enter the gas chambers is of course one of the terribly resonant images of the Second World War, and indeed *Pasażerka* contains dramatic scenes of this. The general mood of unease and foreboding is reinforced with pathetic fallacy: not only the **'wind'**, but also **'rain'**. The sound of the **'accordion'** is also notable; the accordion was originally a German invention, and is an instrument normally associated with the gaiety of social gatherings – in stark contrast to the solemnity of the film the speaker is about to see.

From line 6, the speaker and his wife enter the cinema. The phrase **'velvet dark'** evokes the plush opulence of the Academy: this is in stark contrast to the **'nightmare'** of the concentration camp on the black-and-white screen, and the speaker notes that he and his partner are 'uneasy' about their sense of comfort. Like the image of the **'melancholy'** queues outside the cinema – rendered crassly insignificant in contrast with the queues to the gas chambers – this develops one of the poem's central conceits: the drawing of comparisons between the immense, unspeakable suffering of the Holocaust, and the comforts of living a modern, middle-class lifestyle in fashionable London. The speaker is profoundly aware of his comfortable detachment from the scenes on screen, and this makes him uncomfortable about the ethics of watching a film about such suffering. The speaker deliberately demystifies the experience: in contrast to the way cinema is so often romanticised by filmmakers and cinemagoers as a site of pleasurable escape, the speaker draws attention to the objective absurdity and almost scientific detachment of the experience of **'peer[ing] through the cut-out oblong window'** and seeing **'the human obscenity in close-up.'** Nevertheless, despite the sense of suspicion and detachment, the speaker confesses to having been affected by the film; the images are **'almost authentic'**: **'Certainly we could imagine the stench.'** Given the enjambment used throughout this stanza, this final line, standing alone without rhyme, has considerable impact.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 12-22.
The second stanza continues the description of the experience of being inside the cinema, and the speaker begins to be absorbed by the imagery on screen: **'we forgot the barbed wire / was but a prop and could not scratch an eye'**. In contrast to the short, clipped sentences of the first, this stanza consists of three longer run-on sentences, perhaps suggesting the speaker is beginning to be carried away by the flow of the drama. Although the poem uses almost no full rhyme, there are hints of assonance, consonance and half-rhyme in this stanza that echo the stylisation of filmmaking: **'wire'** and **'eye'**; **'us'**, **'fuss'** and **'trucks'**; **'engine'** and **'own'**. Much of this stanza is a description of certain scenes in the film: the **'striped victims'** is a reference to the striped clothing worn by prisoners at concentration camps. The intriguing phrase **'actors like us'** further hints at the sense of detachment and alienation the speaker feels, and his own privileged position relative to the actual victims of the Holocaust. Again, the speaker draws attention to the strangeness of the detachment between the horror of the events on screen and the comfort of the act of watching: he and his partner **'[munch] milk chocolate'** as they watch. Milk chocolate, like the accordion mentioned in stanza one, is another ironic reference to the influence of German culture on modern life.

Lines 23-33.
The final stanza recalls the hours after the couple leave the cinema, and describes the conflicted feelings the speaker and his partner experience. There is a clear sense of dejection and hopelessness in the first few lines: **'at a loss'**, they **'[say] very little'**. Again, these are subtle hints of the profound contrast between the unspeakable horror of the events they have seen dramatised on screen and the impossibility of fully understanding, mourning, or even describing them. **'[A]t a loss'** is an idiomatic phrase that describes dejection and puzzlement, but also hints at death, the idea of being 'lost for words' in the face of a bereavement. The phrase powerfully connects the feeling of confused dejection with the profundity and confusion of mourning, and is reinforced by the fact the couple **'[say] very little'**.

Further contrasts are drawn between what they have witnessed on screen and the comforts of modern life: they sit in a **'bored espresso bar'** – the implication being that the minor inconvenience of being jaded and **'bored'** in a London coffee shop is almost obscene in the face of the weight of history. They head home and **'[garage] the car'** – the term 'garage', used as a verb here, is an overtly ironic use of the word, evoking middle-class ease, privilege and comfort, while contrasting disturbingly with the image of the arrival of the train carrying prisoners in stanza two, with **'its impotent cry and its guttural trucks.'** There is a further reference to the presence of Germany in modern life, with the couple's au pair being German.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Nevertheless, the couple begin to find comfort in one another in this stanza. The speaker's wife **'[takes] off one glove'** in a gesture of intimacy. Indeed, it emerges here that the poem is actually addressed in second person, to **'[y]ou'**, the speaker's wife. The poem is therefore itself, in the face of the horrors of history, and in spite of the alienation and dejection evoked earlier in the poem, presented as a gesture of human connection and love. Finally, the couple retreat to the marital bed and make love. However, even here there are troubling visual echoes of the gas chamber, as the couple lie **'naked together, / in the dark'**.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The German philosopher Theodor Adorno famously wrote that '[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'.[5] By this, he implied that the enormity of the horrors of the Holocaust are impossible to put into art, words, or music, and questioned the ethics of attempts to recreate or reimagine them. **'A Night Out'** is a poem that ruminates on the complexity and weight of such questions. Through its reflections on the experience of watching a film about it, the poem explores the profound disjuncture between modern, peacetime experience, and those of Jews during the War. It raises the question of whether it is ethical or even possible to adequately represent the Holocaust in art and culture. Through its subtle observations, references and allusions, the poem hints at the extent to which the memory of the Holocaust lives on in post-war life. It reflects on the ways in which the banalities of everyday life, whatever their distance from the crimes of the Second World War, are nevertheless haunted by their legacy. The speaker sees in the queues outside the cinema the rows of young men and women lining up for the gas chambers; in driving his car into his modern home recalls the arrival of trains filled with prisoners. The poem has a further layer of complexity given the poet's Jewish heritage. It bespeaks a sense of emotional alienation and detachment, and the struggle of identification and mourning. The poem is written in a stylistically restrained style and tone, and in the final stanza, the speaker and his wife are **'at a loss'** to express the enormity of the subject and the depth of its emotional resonance in words. The poem is addressed in the second person as a gesture of connection between the speaker and his wife, which may appear to offer solace and hope; however, while it ends with an act of physical love, this is haunted by the memory of what has been seen on the screen.

(5) Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), p. 34.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

How would you describe the voice and tone of the poem?

How does the speaker feel about the film he is watching?

How does the speaker contrast the experience of the concentration camp with modern life?

Is the poem presented as a consolation for the horrors of the Holocaust, or a reminder of them?

SECTION 5

(links active May 2020)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

Dannie Abse courtesy of Literature Wales.

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Link to a recording of Abse reading the poem at the University of Arizona in 1982:
voca.arizona.edu/readings-list/540/1029

Link to more recordings of Abse reading poetry in 2001:
poetryarchive.org/poet/dannie-abse

Link to street scenes in Swinging 1960s London (where and when the poem is set):
youtube.com/watch?v=5zk0eyKzp1c

Link to clip from Pasażerka (best watched muted):
youtube.com/watch?v=uR9NYWjdc7U

FURTHER READING

Archard, Cary, Dannie Abse: A Sourcebook (Bridgend: Seren, 2009).

Curtis, Tony, Dannie Abse (Writers of Wales) (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1985).

Short biography and more poems by Dannie Abse:
poetryfoundation.org/poets/dannie-abse

Dannie Abse's Obituary in The Guardian:
theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/29/dannie-abse

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