

Idris Davies

'Let's Go to Barry Island, Maggie Fach'

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.)

Idris Davies was born in 1905, in Rhymney, Monmouthshire. In addition to his relatively short career as a writer, he was a miner, and also a primary school teacher. Although he was raised in a Welsh-speaking household, his schooling (which began in Wales) was through the medium of English. He has become a significant figure in the development of Welsh writing in English (what used to be more commonly referred to as Anglo-Welsh writing) in the twentieth century.

Davies’s poetry is characterised by a relatively, but deceptively, simple phrasing. While working in the mines in his younger days, Davies attended lectures in Rhymney’s Working Men’s Hall, which ‘sharpened [his] political awareness’.¹ It was also while working as a miner that Davies attended English literature evening classes. Having been introduced to the work of Shelley through conversations with fellow miners, Davies ‘found [in Shelley] clear examples of the way in which literature could relate to politics’.² As such, his poetry (especially his first two volumes, *Gwalia Deserta* and *The Angry Summer*) doesn’t attempt to hide its political leanings.

In 1943 Faber and Faber published Davies’s second collection, *The Angry Summer* (subtitled ‘A Poem of 1926’), from which ‘Lets go to Barry Island, Maggie Fach’, is taken. Its central theme is the effect of industrialisation on south Wales, and specifically the General Strike that took place in 1926. It chronicles the strike from its beginning, evoking the initial camaraderie of the miners, to their eventual return to work. It was written while Davies was living away from Wales (like his previous collection, *Gwalia Deserta*, in 1938). However, despite its serious subject matter, *The Angry Summer* ‘is not by any means all bitterness and savage indignation’.³ The collection was in relative obscurity by the mid-point of the twentieth century, and it wasn’t until the 1970s and 80s, with the work of poet and critic Tony Conran (amongst others), that it gained a new audience and cultural cachet.

Davies died in 1953, just fifteen years after the publication of his first collection.

(1) Alan Vaughan Jones, ‘Idris Davies: The Angry Summer: a poem of 1926’, *The Literary Encyclopedia*, 1:2:2 (2011) <https://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=32344>

(2) *ibid.*

(3) Glyn Jones, *The Dragon Has Two Tongues: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Writers and Writing*, ed. Tony Brown (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), p. 155.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The poem is numbered, not titled; it is the 31st section of Davies's collection *The Angry Summer*. It is now widely known by its opening line 'Let's Go to Barry Island'. Untitled poems are not uncommon in poetry. The poem said to have made Welsh poet Dylan Thomas famous, 'The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower', is also, technically, untitled. Like Davies's poem, it is commonly referred to by its opening line. The title, or lack thereof, is significant because it firmly establishes the poem as a part of something larger. As readers, it is worth reminding ourselves that even though we are reading this poem in an anthology and not in its original published format, that it is part of a larger work and should be read as such.

A Note on the Location.

Barry Island was a hugely popular tourist destination throughout the twentieth century (and still is today). It is no longer technically an island, but a peninsula, after being connected to the mainland by the docks in the 1880s. In recent years, it became synonymous with the BBC sitcom, *Gavin and Stacey* (which was partly set there). The Barry Docks would have been used to transport coal from the south Wales coalfield.

Form.

The poem is comprised of 22 lines, which can be split into the following order: two quatrains (or four-line sections), beginning with '**Let's go**' and '**We'll have tea**'; two tercets (three-line sections), beginning with '**Come on**' and '**Leave the washing**'; and a final two quatrains, beginning with '**We'll carry the sandwiches**' and '**Come, Maggie fach**'. It has an irregular rhyme scheme, with some perfect ('**tips**' / '**lips**') and imperfect ('**fach**' / '**hats**', '**sea**' / '**donkeys**') rhymes.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-4.

The poem opens with almost unbridled optimism, its speaker imploring **'Maggie fach'** ('fach' being a mutated form of the Welsh word 'bach', meaning small or little and used as a term of endearment), to accompany him to Barry Island. Barry was a popular destination for day-trippers from the south Wales valleys, as well as the English midlands (hence the speaker's pointed reference to just **'one day by the sea'**). The line **'And sherbert and buns and paper hats'** has a notable nursery rhyme quality to it (try reading it aloud to hear its rhythm), which is not surprising given Davies's use of nursery rhyme rhythms in his other work, such as his popular poem 'The Bells of Rhymney' from his previous collection *Gwalia Deserta*. Line 4 contains the alliterative **'rattling ride on the Figure Eight'**, further emphasising the sprightly, rhythmic quality of the opening. Incidentally, the Figure Eight rollercoaster closed in 1939, the year in which the Second World War broke out across Europe, and four years prior to the publication of *The Angry Summer* in 1943.

Lines 5-8.

Davies deploys the complex internal rhyme **'sands'** and **'islands'** which lend the quatrain a lively, if uneven rhythm. The use of **'islands'** here also echoes the poem's opening line **'Let's go to Barry Island'**. Lines 6 and 7 use a kind of musical pun, as the speaker invites Maggie to sit with **'the folk of Cwm Rhondda'** and sing **'the sweet old hymns of Pantycelyn'**. William Williams Pantycelyn was a famous Welsh hymn writer, whose hymn 'Arglwydd, arwain trwy'r anialwch' (in English, 'Lord, lead thou through the wilderness', but more commonly referred to by the title 'Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer'), is often sung to the tune 'Cwm Rhondda' by the Welsh composer John Hughes. The term 'folk' has added significance, given Davies's interest in folk-song and folklore. These lines instigate a more nostalgic, mournful tone that continues in the tercets that follow it.

Lines 9-11.

'Come on, Maggie fach' parallels the poem's opening line, but in its alteration it takes on a more insistent, and intemperate quality, as the speaker's anxiety appears to be increasing. As his apparent anxiousness to catch the train increases, the speaker becomes more focused on the consequences of missing the opportunity. It appears that he is not only motivated by *going* to Barry Island for the day (for all the fun that it offers), but in *leaving* his and Maggie's home. If they don't catch the train before it is too late, the **'kids will be howling'**, and **'Sticky with dirt'**, a thought that clearly worries the speaker. Here the children appear as more burdensome than their previous mention in line 2.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 12-14.

The first allusion to the work of the household (a subject that comes up in a number of Davies's poems), '**Leave the washing alone**', grants some insight into the relationship dynamic between the speaker and Maggie, while also giving the reader a glimpse of the home life that they share together. The speaker implores Maggie to '**put on [her] best**', suggesting that her current appearance is not fit for a day trip, but also that the importance of the trip itself is on a par with a Sunday trip to church or chapel (it echoes the phrase 'put on your Sunday best'). The '**holiday sea**' is, at first reading, an odd description, but one that increases in significance when compared with Davies's reference to the sea in section 43 of the same sequence: '**Carry the rubbish to the seas and the oceans, / Wash away the slag-heaps of our troubles and sorrows**'. The sea is a complex metaphor, one that not only signifies an opportunity for enjoyment, but also one that provides a chance to cleanse oneself of troubles.

Lines 15-18.

In the phrase '**big brown bag**', Davies employs more alliteration. Perhaps the speaker is trying to reinforce the positive reasons for going, rather than the negative consequences of not going. Once again, the day trip is seen as an opportunity to '**leave [their] troubles behind**', and again the fleetingness of the opportunity is emphasised by the phrase '**for a day**'. The following two lines are perhaps the most directly political as the poem gets. First, there is a reference to the '**big black tips**' (also known as spoil tips, which could be hugely contaminated mounds of waste material created in mining). Next, the speaker alludes to the conflicts and mounting tension between striking miners in the phrase '**rival soup-kitchens**'. The idyllic imagery of the opening of the poem is completely destroyed with the description '**quarrelling like hell**', which signifies the emotional distance that we as readers have travelled. We're now a long way from '**sherbert and buns and paper hats**'.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 19-22.

The final quatrain sees the speaker attempt to gather himself for a final plea to Maggie, and it is the poem's most richly suggestive section. As in the second quatrain, the importance of music is once again at the forefront of the poem, and it is woven in with a final compliment: **'an old Welsh tune on your little red lips'**. The **'Welsh tune'** may well be a reference to the hymn sung above ('Arglwydd, arwain trwy'r anialwch' / 'Lord, lead thou through the wilderness'), the theme of which is the escape from bondage. It contains the line: 'Pan yn troedio glan lорddonen / Par i'm hofnau suddo i gyd' // 'When I walk the bank of the Jordan, / Cause all my fears to sink', the sentiment of which clearly corresponds with the speaker's desire to go to the **'sea'**. The reference to the **'rose'** is also rich with symbolism, especially if we are to understand that it is red (like Maggie's lips). Red roses may traditionally symbolise romance, and in a Christian context may even be considered a symbol of the Virgin Mary. However, could Davies also be subversively referring to the red rose as a symbol of socialism? Arthur Cook, General Secretary of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain (and a key figure in the 1926 strike), is referred to elsewhere in *The Angry Summer* as **'wearing a red rose in his lapel'**. **'Down to the holiday sea'**, the poem's final line, is an almost perfect repetition of line 14 (which itself echoes line 2). The movement of the speaker and Maggie mirrors the movement of the coal from the south Wales coalfield to Barry Docks, from where it would have been shipped around the world. The poem could be read as an extended metaphor for such a movement, and once again the sea provides both a literal and metaphorical opportunity for an escape from everyday life.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'Let's Go to Barry Island' is a deceptively complex poem. It is both playful and serious, optimistic and mournful, and consequently it is difficult to settle on a fixed meaning. Read in isolation (without the context of the collection as a whole), its references to life in the Valleys are small, but not insignificant facets of the overall poem. Read in the context of *The Angry Summer*, however, and these small mentions of valleys life become much more significant. The reasons to escape the valley become the primary source of the poem's tension (and the speaker's anxiety). The reasons to go to Barry Island, at least those given in the first quatrain, almost appear trivial in comparison to the reasons for leaving.

The poem is, both by design and circumstance, nostalgic: 'Conceived and written more than a decade after the event it recreates, this "Poem of 1926" was always already belated'.⁴ Positive, or optimistic, readings of the poem are certainly plausible. Even if the pleasures of Barry Island are deferred for another day (we don't know if they do actually get on the train and go), the speaker's enthusiasm in attempting to persuade Maggie to '**put on [her] best**' is contagious. To read the poem as optimistic does not necessarily mean, however, that one need ignore the speaker's ulterior motivations for going to Barry (to get away from the stresses of the ongoing strike).

The poetic techniques used by Davies in the poem are also worthy of attention. While it doesn't conform to a regular rhyme scheme, it is tightly structured around its quatrains and tercets. The sections are divided, with the exception of the semicolon separating the first two quatrains, into full sentences. These sentences are syntactically straightforward, lending the poem a frank, almost candid quality. Davies's use of repetition and half-rhymes adds a musicality that reflects the centrality of songs (in this case, hymns that would have been sung in church), to the poem. While the poem doesn't mention church specifically, the speakers talk about a trip to Barry Island almost like a pilgrimage of sorts (as implied by the singing of hymns by '**Pantycelyn**', and wearing their '**best**' dress).

(4) 'Idris Davies: The Angry Summer: a poem of 1926', *The Literary Encyclopedia*, 1:2:2 (2011) <https://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=32344>

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What can you infer about the relationship between the speaker and Maggie?

How does the poem shift between positive and negative emotions, and what impression are you left with at the end?

What can you learn about what life was like in the Valleys from the poem?

What do you think is the effect of the repetition of certain lines or phrases?

SECTION 5

(links active August 2019)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

People's Collection Wales has a huge number of excellent photographs of Barry Island in its heyday. A particular highlight is this postcard depicting the Fairground, including the **'Figure Eight'** rollercoaster mentioned in line 4 of 'Let's Go to Barry Island':

<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/838301>

This is a picture of Idris Davies:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idris_Davies#/media/File:IdrisDaviesImage.jpg

Here is a famous poster of the poem 'Let's Go to Barry Island, Maggie Fach':

<https://www.graffeg.com/05/>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

People's Collection Wales has several documentaries on Barry Island. Of particular interest to readers of Davies's poem are the two following excerpts, covering the effect of the 1926 General Strike (<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/392952>) and the experience of visiting Barry Island around the period depicted by Davies (<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/392953>).

The link below is to a video of a version of 'Guide Me, Oh Thou Great Jehovah', sung to the tune of Cwm Rhondda. The song is often referred to as 'Bread of Heaven':

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wT4n1hGjDDg>



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