

W.H. Davies

'Leisure'

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.)

W.H. Davies (1871–1940) was born in Newport. In his twenties, he spent several years moving around America as a beggar, leaping on and off moving trains to get around, ultimately leading to the loss of his right leg in a train accident. *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp*, which chronicles these experiences, was published in 1908. *The Soul’s Destroyer and Other Poems*, his first collection of verse, draws on his experiences of a down-and-out existence in London lodging houses, and was published in 1905. ‘**Leisure**’ appeared in his collection *Songs of Joy*, published in 1911. Supported and celebrated by literary figures such as Edward Thomas and George Bernard Shaw, as well as the Georgian Poetry anthology series, Davies published more than twenty volumes of poetry, as well as works of fiction and non-fiction. *Young Emma*, an autobiographical account of his courtship of his wife Helen Payne, was published posthumously in 1980. ‘**Leisure**’ is the poem for which he is most famous and which is most anthologised, but given how prolific Davies was as a poet, the body of his work inevitably moves in a wide range of directions. Beyond the celebration of a rural idyll in ‘**Leisure**’, for example, there are other poems which deal with the gritty urban reality of destitution and squalor he was familiar with, including, in *Poetry 1900–2000*, ‘The Inquest’.

The celebration of the simple life in ‘**Leisure**’, of taking time to understand nature, can be understood in a range of contexts. One of these is that Davies wrote a great deal of poetry about the natural world and was keen to celebrate it: ‘The Kingfisher’ from the Library of Wales anthology is among poems in this style and, in ‘Days That Have Been’, a celebration of nature is explicitly linked to parts of Wales. Davies’s 1927 book *A Poet’s Pilgrimage* documents a walk east through Wales from Carmarthen, while his early poem ‘The Soul’s Destroyer’ includes a long walk home from London to Newport. Davies’s poverty and the fact that he travelled so much on foot put him in a unique position to celebrate and value the natural world. This desire to celebrate nature was also deepened by his friendship with poet Edward Thomas.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

Another useful aspect of context is that Davies's early urban life of poverty and destitution in London, living among down-and-out characters in lodging houses, is a subject he writes about in a range of poems. It doesn't seem too much of a stretch to think that Davies's love for nature in '**Leisure**' is part of a desire to escape the grim reality he often saw around him. As a result, it is possible to read '**Leisure**', with its celebration of the simple life, as a poem with a working-class, left-wing political stance, which celebrates nature precisely because of Davies's awareness of what the economic situation of his time and an urban existence did to people. In these lines from 'The Soul's Destroyer', for example, he explicitly links the urban world with a grimness – in this case connected with alcohol – which causes him to desire an escape to nature:

One morning I awoke with lips gone dry,
The tongue an obstacle to choke the throat,
And aching body weighted with more heads
Than Pluto's dog; the features hard and set,
As though encased in a plaster cast;
With limbs all sore through falling here and there
To drink the various ales the Borough kept
From London Bridge to Newington, and streets
Adjoining, alleys, lanes obscure from them,
Then thought of home and of the purer life,
Of Nature's air, and having room to breathe,
A sunny sky, green field, and water's sound;
Of peaceful rivers not yet fretful grown
As when their mouths have tasted Ocean's salt;
And where the rabbits sit amid their ferns,
Or leap, to flash the white of their brown tails.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The title can be said to straightforwardly set out the subject of the poem. The poem is a celebration of taking time out to look around at the natural world, and from this point of view it is important that a positive word like '**Leisure**' is chosen as opposed to something like 'idleness'. '**Leisure**' is also quite a big word in terms of economic, sociological and political thinking. How is '**Leisure**' defined by a society and what is its exact relationship to economic productivity? The very fact that Davies, with a background of poverty, dares to write about '**Leisure**', often seen as the preserve of a moneyed class, could be seen as a political statement.

Form.

The simplicity and directness of the poem's message – that we need to take time off work and appreciate nature – is mirrored in several formal devices the poem employs. One of these is the repetitive structure of each stanza, as stanzas 2–6 all begin with the phrase '**No time**'. Davies is essentially building a rhetorical argument, imploring us to take time out, and repetition like this is effective, as it would be in any political speech. Another important feature is the use of full-rhymed couplets, and a third is the very regular rhythmic form, as the poem falls into iambic tetrameter: 'What **is** this **life** if, **full** of **care**, / We **have** no **time** to **stand** and **stare**.' Finally there is a simplicity at the level of vocabulary, for very few words in the poem are more than one syllable, and none are more than two. This simplicity and directness at the level of form and vocabulary may enact the poem's message of embracing a simple life, but can also be read as having some political importance. If it is accepted that the poem's desire to claim leisure and the beauty of nature for all, as opposed simply to a moneyed class, has a political dimension, then this political motivation may be mirrored at the level of language and form – which, in its simplicity and directness, can be read as an attempt to claim poetry for all of us.

The poem has some relationship to a sonnet, in the sense that it is fourteen lines long. A sonnet has a volta, though, a point at which the poem turns in a different direction, whereas Davies's speaker appears to say the same thing continually throughout the poem. Again, this may be seen to enact the poem's message, since the simplicity of the way of life it is expounding is made clear in the simplicity of the writing. If there is a turn, then it comes about in the final couplet, where the speaker returns to the poem's opening and answers his own question. This circularity adds to the poem's rhetorical impact.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-6.

'Leisure' is in many ways a straightforward poem. In order to forward its argument that we need to take more time to look around us, it begins by asking **'What is this life if, full of care, / We have no time to stand and stare.'** Opening with a question in this way is an effective way of drawing the reader in, implying that the speaker (or writer) knows more than we do, that the poem has something to teach us. The forceful alliteration of **'stand and stare'**, in its unchanging sound, conveys the moment of stillness Davies's speaker is arguing for, and gives force to his idea that this really matters. The rhyme here sets up the simple binary opposition that Davies structures his poem around: a life **'full of care'** versus having the leisure to **'stand and stare'**. It is interesting that Davies describes a life **'full of care'** as opposed to a life full of work or labour. This means that, while the poem can be read, in the context of Davies's writing, as about a working-class desire for leisure, the phrase 'full of care' is open ended enough to suggest all sorts of concern, which widens the poem's scope and appeal.

In stanzas 2-3, the speaker begins to offer concrete examples of the sorts of things we miss in a life which is 'full of care'. A series of concrete examples such as this is rhetorically persuasive, and the listing of negatives – things that we are not getting – makes the poem seem something of a cautionary tale. Without time **'to stand beneath the boughs / And stare as long as sheep or cows'**, we miss **'Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.'** This second detail creates a sense of mystery – we want to know where those nuts are hidden! – which deepens the desirability of Davies's simple life. Under the current system, it seems, human beings are treated worse than animals, and are not even allowed to **'stare as long as sheep or cows.'** The way in which political systems and work can reduce us to a position lower than animals is of course subsequently powerfully explored by George Orwell in *1984*. The argument of this poem also seems to bear some relationship to the thinking of Robert Tressell's 1914 working-class masterpiece *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*. It is perhaps important that Davies begins his examples in the poem with animals (cows and squirrels), living beings whom we can relate to and connect with, before turning to **'Streams'**, **'stars'** and the personification of **'Beauty'** later in the poem.

Lines 7-12.

These lines sustain the list of examples of things we miss by being so busy, deepening the rhetorical impact of the poem's argument. What we are essentially missing, the poem argues, is a connection with nature, in which we might see, for example, how streams reflect the stars, as described in this beautiful simile: **'Streams full of stars like skies at night.'** The simile seems to imply that we lack the time not only to look at the stream in the first place, but also to perceive its beauty, to appreciate the way it is **'like skies at night.'**

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

In stanzas 5–6, beauty is personified and feminised: **‘No time to turn at Beauty’s glance, / And watch her feet, how they can dance.’** Unlike the other examples – the sheep and cows, the squirrels, the stream – which are described in one short stanza before the speaker moves on, here we see two stanzas dedicated to **‘Beauty’**: **‘No time to wait till her mouth can / Enrich that smile her eyes began.’** The poem has moved from small examples to a big idea here, and this may explain the extra time given to an abstract **‘Beauty’**. It is also important in terms of the poem’s structure that this focus on a personified idea comes after the more immediately graspable examples of the animals and the stream, so that readers are guided into the poem before being hit with something a little more complex and summative. The fact that **‘Beauty’** is feminised can be read in the context of Davies’s presentation of and attitude towards women more widely in his writing. ‘Catharine’ and ‘Jenny’ are among poems which idealise his childhood friends, while ‘Nell Barnes’ and ‘The Bird of Paradise’ explore the lives of prostitutes whom he knew later in his life. ‘The Collier’s Wife’, ‘The Inquest’ and ‘A Woman’s History’, all anthologised in *Poetry 1900–2000*, offer a way of understanding Davies’s feminising of **‘Beauty’** in **‘Leisure’**.

The other thing to observe about the presentation of **‘Beauty’** here is that she is depicted as looking. The poem has begun with the idea that we should have more **‘time to stand and stare’** and this act of looking is echoed by **‘Beauty’** looking back at us in these lines. Tellingly though, **‘Beauty’** doesn’t **‘stare’** – she offers us a **‘glance’**, which we can miss, and the second reference to her looking – the **‘smile her eyes began’** – is again something subtle that, supposedly, we have **‘No time’** to see.

Lines 13–14.

In these lines, the speaker clearly answers the question with which he started the poem, stating, **‘A poor life this if, full of care, / We have no time to stand and stare.’** That the poem returns to its opening with exactly the same rhymes gives the ending a rhetorical effectiveness. Having taught us its lesson through a range of examples, the poem hammers home its message in this concluding couplet.

Just as the act of describing this life as **‘full of care’** in the opening, as opposed to full of work or labour, is an interesting choice, so too the choice of **‘poor’** as opposed to say, ‘bad’ or ‘strange’ is an interesting choice here. If one accepts that the poem can be read as claiming leisure for an underclass when it has traditionally been seen as the preserve of an elite, the other resonance of poor – not ‘bad’ but ‘connected with poverty’ – must be in play. The poem, starting as it does with an engaging question, moving through examples and coming to a clear conclusion, seems to want to persuade us of something: that we should take time out. But the lesson seems so self-evident, the advantages of a life of **‘Leisure’** so great within the poem, that one wonders why anyone would need persuading. The only thing in the poem preventing us from pursuing a life of nature and beauty is the life which is **‘full of care,’** and it’s therefore worth interrogating what this might be.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

If the **'poor'** life is a life of poverty, then the **'care'** may be about work and money worries, and read in this light the poem can therefore be seen not as a piece persuading us to embrace a simpler life, but rather a piece protesting the fact that the working classes are denied this life; a piece claiming that work, and the economic and political system of capitalism, distances the working classes from the beauty of nature.

While much about Davies's life and wider body of work – his experience of poverty, his exploration of the life of down-and-out characters, even the way in which money worries drove his enormously prolific literary output – would seem to justify a left-wing reading of this poem, it is interesting that politics is not front and centre in the piece. The word **'care'** is sufficiently open-ended that a reader is able to attach to it whatever their concerns might be, financial or otherwise, encouraged by the speaker's use of the plural first-person pronoun, **'We'**. It would be possible to read this pronoun as indicating a specific class, but the poem is open-ended enough for this to mean all humanity, and its immediate message, of taking time out to enjoy life and appreciate nature, is relevant to all. Importantly, that **'We'** makes the poem's speaker one of us, someone who knows he has to learn the very lesson he is leading us through; as a kind of teacher, the speaker of the poem is lent a humility as well as an authority, which increases the inclusiveness and charm of the poem.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'Leisure' is easily W.H. Davies's most famous poem; it has been anthologised and re-anthologised, and has even been used in television adverts. This may be a result of the simplicity and directness of its language and form, and the universal appeal of its message – let's all be a bit less busy, let's look around at all this beauty while we can. It is known by readers who know nothing else of Davies or even of poetry, and has created an impression of Davies as a poet who prizes the simple life and the beauty of nature. While this is an important strain in his work, illustrated in poems like 'The Kingfisher', collected in *Poetry 1900-2000*, there is a wider body of work, much of which is far more in touch with the gritty reality of life in the twentieth century. In this context, it seems at least possible to see '**Leisure**' as a classic of working-class literature, and its author as someone who prizes leisure and nature precisely because of his understanding of how a capitalist system can separate the least fortunate in society from the aspects of life which this poem idealises.

There is a great deal going on within the poem to make its attractive message memorable. The rhymed couplets in iambic tetrameter and the repetitive phrase '**No time**' have a great impact. In addition, the poem opens with a question, moves from concrete examples, such as the more tangible animal examples in earlier stanzas, to the personification of '**Beauty**', and concludes with a statement that echoes the poem's opening. In addition, the language choices are simple and direct. While these techniques may explain the poem's success in persuading us of its argument, it could also be concluded that, just as '**Leisure**' suggests freedom should be there for all of us, so Davies's linguistic and formal choices suggest that poetry is for all of us.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Why does the poem personify '**Beauty**' and what is the impact of this?

How does the speaker persuade us to accept that a slower life, in touch with nature, would be a good thing?

What relevance does this early twentieth-century poem have to a life of social media and smartphones in the early twenty-first century?

Is this just a poem that says a slow life, surrounded by nature, is great, or does it have any other dimensions?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5
(links active August 2019)
All links are clickable

William Henry Davies. Photograph uploaded by Literature Wales:
<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/36364>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

The Poetry Foundation has a useful biography of Davies and suggestions for further reading:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-h-davies>

The Poetry Archive has an interesting recording of Simon Armitage reading 'The Inquest'.

<https://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/w-h-davies>

The National Library for Wales details the Davies materials the library holds, and has a concise biography:

<https://www.library.wales/collections/learn-more/archives-of-welsh-writers-in-english/w-h-davies-manuscripts>

This BBC piece by Phil Carradice offers an overview of Davies's life:

https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/waleshistory/2011/05/wh_davies_welsh_super_tramp.html

A reading of Leisure by W.H. Davies: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oF0n7h-rpBo> While the animation is perhaps a bit daft, the introduction Davies provides is useful in opening up more complex readings of the poem.

Davies's interesting review of Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*:

<https://www.newstatesman.com/cultural-capital/2013/01/confessions-down-and-out>

The BBC have useful overviews of Davies's life: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/sites/wh-davies/> and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-south-east-wales-15482428>



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