

Dannie Abse

'Epithalamion'

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.)

Dannie Abse (1923–2014) was a prolific and highly respected poet, novelist, autobiographer, playwright, and editor. Born in Cardiff to a prominent Jewish family, he studied medicine in London, qualifying as a doctor in 1950. In 1951 he married Joan Abse, née Mercer, a noted art historian who was a strong influence on her husband’s writing life. Abse began publishing from the late 1940s onwards, and combined careers in medicine and literature, a duality which is frequently reflected in his writing. His dual Jewish and Welsh cultural identity is also evident in some of his works, particularly in the engaging autobiographical and semi-autobiographical prose. Associated with the Movement poets in the 1950s, and established for many years in Golders Green, London, Abse never lost touch with his Welsh roots; he was a lifelong Cardiff ‘Bluebirds’ fan and, in later years, spent increasing amounts of time at his home in Ogmere-on-Sea. Joan Abse was tragically killed in a road accident in 2005; Abse’s moving poetry collection *Running Late* (2006) and his memoir *The Presence* (2007) are elegiac tributes to her. ‘Epithalamion’ was published in 1952.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'epithalamium' as a 'nuptial song or poem in praise of the bride and bridegroom, and praying for their prosperity'. The word comes, via Latin, from the Greek words for 'upon' and 'bride chamber'. Edmund Spenser, the English Renaissance poet, wrote a distinguished 'Epithalamion' in 1595 and it is a poetic form and term more associated with the sixteenth century, rather than the twentieth. Abse's use of the term as a title alerts us to its literary heritage.

Form.

Form: The poem is written in five equal sestets, rhyming initially abacac, with considerable variation in the rhyming pattern from stanza to stanza. The most frequent rhyme is with the word 'dead' ('wed', 'said', 'head', 'bed'); each stanza ends with that word, a surprising fact in a poem ostensibly celebrating a marriage.

Most lines are between seven and ten syllables in length and have four main stresses (tetrameter). It is clear that Abse is avoiding the regularity of the iambic pentameter (ten-syllable lines with an unwavering unstressed-stressed pattern) which is one of the most characteristic metrical patterns in traditional English poetry from the age of Shakespeare. Instead, he is writing a lyrical poem (i.e. a short, song-like poem expressing personal emotions) in the metrical tradition but injecting into it a distinctively modern variety and irregularity. One way he does this is by beginning every stanza with a stressed syllable ('SINGing', 'NOW', 'SHIPwrecked', 'COME', 'LISTen') which immediately disrupts any potential iambic pattern. Nevertheless, some lines have an unmistakably lyrical rhythm suggestive of a singing voice e.g. 'and send our love to the loveless world/of all the living and all the dead.'

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1 - 6.

The poem opens with a present participle, **'singing'**, which immediately indicates activity and enjoyment. It is also self-referential in that the poet himself is 'singing' this song to us; it is highly conventional in Classical poetry to begin with a reference to the poet's song e.g. the first words of Virgil's *Aeneid* are (in translation) 'I sing of arms and the man...' Abse draws on this convention but also adapts it to his own purposes, using a first-person voice but one which declares an unusual fact: that he has today married his **'beautiful', 'white'** girl **'in a barley field'**. The description of the **'white'** beloved is conventional in courtly love poetry, and there is a hint of the pastoral tradition in the location of this 'marriage'. The beloved in courtly poetry is often described in 'blazon' style, enumerating her beauties, primary of which is frequently white skin, which is associated with purity and refinement (1). It is also possible that Abse's use of **'white'** here may be linked to the association of the colour white and female beauty in Welsh traditions, as reflected in names such as Bronwen (white breast), Olwen (white trail), Blodwen (white flower), Gwen (white). Moreover, the name 'Gwen' is used in medieval Welsh poetry less as a personal name than as a noun simply meaning 'pretty girl'. The rite of marriage being celebrated in this opening stanza is clearly an unconventional one, bereft of most religious trappings. Though the words of the wedding ceremony are echoed and repeated in **'I thee wed'**, the wedding ring is made of grass. One reading of this line might suggest that the scene conjured up is of children 'playing at' marriage; however, the erotic undertones of the succeeding stanzas would appear to undercut that notion. However, the scene conjured up here is certainly endowed with the innocence and simplicity associated with childhood. Male speaker and female beloved are united in the fourth line and in the fifth join together to **'send'** their love out into the world, as a message of joy and hope.

Alliteration and repetition are used in this stanza to enhance the lyrical tone e.g. **'beautiful'/'barley'/'blade'; 'green'/'grass'; 'love'/'loveless'; 'I thee wed, I thee wed'**. Both **'barley'** and **'grass'** suggest the world of Nature and connote fertility and vibrancy; they also conjure up a colourful scene - white, gold, green - in opposition to the implied drabness of the **'loveless world'** beyond. There is indeed the suggestion of the lovers constituting a small, self-sufficient world of their own in opposition to the hostile world outside. In this regard, the imagery is reminiscent of John Donne's famous love poem, 'The Sun Rising', in which the lovers' bed is a world in itself: addressing the morning sun, the speaker declares in the final lines of the poem: 'Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;/This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere.' (Abse also mentions the lovers' **'bed'** in the final stanza). Yet Abse's lovers are not as self-absorbed as Donne's; they also **'send'** their love to the world outside, to **'all the living and all the dead.'** Their love is seen as a blessing or balm, even to the dead, as if their vitality is capable of assuaging the pain of mortality.

(1) Shakespeare mocks this courtly tradition in his well-known sonnet 130, 'My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun', in which he also mentions 'If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun', undercutting the necessity for the beloved's skin to be 'white'.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 7-12.

The second stanza mirrors the shape and form of the first and again begins by emphasizing the dynamism of the present moment, 'now'. The opening line, '**Now, no more than vulnerable human**' is an instance of that irregular rhythm mentioned above which disrupts the expected mellifluousness of a lyric poem. Again there are hints of the characteristic idiom of the Metaphysical poets when the speaker plays with the idea that the lovers are '**more than one, less than two**', calling to mind Donne's conceit of the lovers as '**stiff twin compasses**' in 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning'. Acknowledging their vulnerable mortality now, the poem nevertheless continues to celebrate the consummation of their love in the barley field. The lovers are '**more than one, less than two**' in the sense that they are magnified and exalted by their love, but they are also made mutually dependent. The last three lines of the sestet introduce a metaphor of love as a '**rent**' that is paid on the idyllic space of the barley field, though time, personified as '**bailiffs**,' constantly threatens their occupation of this space (2). Only the dead, lying in their graves, are immune to the demands of the bailiffs of time. In contrast to the confident hyperbole of the first stanza, this stanza emphasizes the temporary and precarious position of their lovers in their idyllic world, particularly in its use of the '**rent**'/'**bailiffs**' metaphor, drawn from the humdrum world of commercial exchange. '**Bailiffs**' is an image suggestive of threat and violence, echoing the '**loveless**' world outside mentioned in the first stanza. The fact that they return '**anew**' to '**all the living**' points to the remorseless quality of Time: like a persistent bailiff, he will not be denied the prize he will one day demand of them: their very lives. The last line of the sestet echoes that of the first stanza, and establishes a refrain with variations on '**the living**' and '**the dead**' which recurs in the final lines of each stanza (3).

(2) In 1950 Gwyn Williams published an anthology of poems translated from the Welsh entitled *The Rent that's due to Love*, published in London in 1950. The title may have prompted Abse's unusual image.

(3) The binary opposition between the living and the dead calls to mind the repeated binaries in Dylan Thomas's 'The force that through the green fuse' (1933) a poem with which 'Epithalamion' shares a range of thematic and linguistic similarities: its elemental colours, neat formal stanzas, concern with time and juxtaposition between the natural life force and death are echoed in Abse's poem, though Thomas's poem is more elegiac than celebratory. Moreover, the green and gold colours of 'Epithalamion' and its natural imagery, as well as its formal dexterity, call to mind Dylan Thomas's 1945 poem, 'Fern Hill'.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 13-18.

This stanza begins with a striking and complex image of the sun being shipwrecked and sinking into the **'harbours'** of a sky, releasing its **'liquid cargoes/of marigolds.'** The gold colour of the setting sun and the marigold flowers intensifies the gold of the barley and sets off the green of the grass and the white skin of the girl. Clearly, the image is suggestive of sexual consummation, calling to mind Captain Cat's plea to the (dead) Rosie Probert in Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*, 'Let me shipwreck in your thighs' (4). The phrase **'unloads its liquid cargoes'** is suggestive of ejaculation, while the stillness of the lovers in line 4 indicates a post-coital exhaustion. Moreover, the setting of the sun measures time passing and hints at the encroachment of darkness. Unexpectedly, however, the lover turns outwards in the fourth line and asks: **'who else wishes/ to speak, what more can be said/ by all the living against all the dead?'** The question may be interpreted as rhetorical, implying that nothing more than their love can be spoken against all the dead. Alternatively, the speaker may be genuinely now seeking other voices than his own, perhaps in order to strengthen the position of these two defiant lovers **'against all the dead'**.

Lines 19-24.

The focus of the poem now appears to shift from the intimate, self-contained world of the two lovers outwards to the natural environment around them. The stanza begins with an imperative, **'Come'**, addressed to the **'wedding guests'**. It is the first time in the poem that the presence of others is acknowledged. However, these others turn out to be not humans but living entities of the natural world, including trees, barley, wind, birds, and flowers. The vivid colours and lovely images combine to create a gay scene in which the different living elements combine, dance-like. The repeated imperative **'come'**, then, is a kind of invitation to the dance, and it is notable that here the dead are included, along with the living, in a universal, dynamic act of celebration. There is a certain brío or panache about the confident voice of this celebratory stanza. The notion of a natural marriage is again reiterated here, with the blackbirds taking on the role of **'priests'**.

The beautiful rhythm of the final line of the stanza, **'come the living and come the dead'** has echoes of folk song or perhaps a nursery rhyme, reminding us of the child-like connotations of the opening stanza. The poem seems to invite us to view it with a double vision: one is innocent and childlike (after all, the bride is a mere **'girl'**) and the other is adult and sexual (looking forward to **'my human bed'** in the final stanza).

(4) Of course *Under Milk Wood* was not published (posthumously) until 1954, two years after the publication of 'Epithalamion', but Thomas is known to have performed various parts of the play in London in the late 1940s, so it is possible that Abse may have heard and been inspired by these lines before publication, or the similarity may be purely accidental.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 25-30

The imperatives **'listen'** and **'tell'** are here addressed to all the elements identified in the previous stanza as the **'wedding guests'**, namely the witnesses to the ritual act of love: **'flowers, birds, winds, worlds'**. The movement outwards which began in the third stanza here reaches its culmination in the lover's declaration, echoing the opening lines of the poem, that **'today'** he married **'more than a white girl in the barley.'** The expansive final lines suggest that the marriage being celebrated in this formal lyric is not simply between two individuals but rather is a sacramental act which signals the speaker's embracing of the whole world around him, including **'all the living and all the dead'**. The poem has come full circle from the echo of John Donne's 'The Sun Rising': far from being self-sufficient, the lovers are inherently a part of the wider world and their celebration of life must encompass that wider world and not be a retreat from it. At least, this is what the male voice of the poem declares; what the **'white girl'** thinks remains unclear, since she is not given a voice. In this regard, at least, Abse continues the tradition of male-authored love poetry exemplified by the work of John Donne.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'Epithalamion' is an early poem by Dannie Abse, first published in his second volume of verse, *Walking under Water* (1952). In a 1982 interview, Abse told Joseph Cohen, author of the first critical book about his work, that the poem had been written in a period when he himself was 'immature' and when the fashionable literary mode of the time was 'neo-romantic'. When Cohen states that he assumes that the poem 'came out of actual experience', Abse dryly observes 'I don't recall ever making love to a girl in a barley field!' (5) Earlier, in a 1980 essay entitled 'A Voice of my Own,' Abse had suggested that the poem lacks his distinctive 'voice' as a poet, which only developed later; instead, he regards it as an 'anonymous' poem which belongs to 'the central English lyrical tradition' (6). He indicates that it was written at a time when he was still experimenting as a poet, trying to find his own voice, and to shake off the influence of the poets he greatly admired at the time, namely Dylan Thomas and Rainer Maria Rilke. That there are certainly echoes of the voice and imagery, as well as the formal precision of Dylan Thomas in the poem, suggests that Abse was not entirely successful in shaking off this influence. Nevertheless, this is a beautiful lyric poem which, unsurprisingly, has often been anthologised. Its voice comes across as that of a young man, with the freshness and energy of youth, as well as the idealism. It is, as the title suggests, a celebratory poem, and yet it is also one in which human temporality and mortality are acknowledged and mourned. A poem dating from the very early 1950s, it is of its time in its neo-romantic tone as well as its suppression of the female voice. If Abse in this early poem has yet to discover his own distinctive voice, he nevertheless displays technical skill, rhythmic panache, and a subtle awareness of poetic traditions in the creation of a memorable lyric full of verbal beauty.

(5) Joseph Cohen, 'Conversations with Dannie Abse', in *Dannie Abse: A Sourcebook*, ed. Cary Archard (Bridgend: Seren, 2009) pp. 167-182 (172).

(6) Dannie Abse, 'A Voice of my Own', in *Dannie Abse: A Sourcebook*, ed. Cary Archard (Bridgend: Seren, 2009) pp. 48-56 (53).

FOUR QUESTIONS PUPILS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What kind of 'marriage' is being celebrated in the poem?

What kind of atmosphere is created by the setting of the poem?

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

Why doesn't the 'white girl' speak?

SECTION 5

(links active August 2018)

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PHOTOGRAPHS

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p029yyth>

[https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw85312/Dannie-Abse?
LinkID=mp71380&role=sit&rNo=1](https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw85312/Dannie-Abse?LinkID=mp71380&role=sit&rNo=1)

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<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-south-east-wales-24046366>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

<http://www.dannieabse.com/>

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/dannie-abse>

<https://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/24823/29/Dannie-Abse>

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