

# Dannie Abse

## 'Not Adlestrop'

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 was born in Cardiff in 1923 and was brought up in the city. He moved to London in 1943 to study Medicine at King’s College and went on to qualify as a doctor in 1950. In spite of living in London, Abse maintained a strong connection to the area in which he grew up, and owned a second home in the town of Ogmores-by-Sea which he visited when possible. His writing often explores ideas relating to identity and the concept of returning home, with poems such as ‘The Game’ and ‘Return to Cardiff’ depicting the city of his youth. Abse was a secular Jew and was particularly conscious of this identity, which often surfaced in the reflections in his later work. His work as a doctor and the many different facets of his identity contribute to the complexity of his poetry, which often weaves his love of life and sense of nostalgia for his childhood together with influences from the variety of other writers and poets who inspired him.

As well as publishing over sixteen collections of poetry, Abse was also the author of an autobiographical prose work, *Ash on a Young Man’s Sleeve* (1954) and was the editor of the seminal anthology *Twentieth Century Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (1997). His work, both poetry and prose, is often characterised by a balance of gentle humour and fascination with the significance of everyday moments.

(A brief biography is available in the *Library of Wales anthology Poetry 1900–2000*, ed. Meic Stephens, pp. 304–5.)

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Title.

The title of the poem, **'Not Adlestrop'**, draws on a well-known poem by another Welsh poet, Edward Thomas. Thomas's poem, published in 1917, was entitled 'Adlestrop' and describes a train journey he took in 1914. The journey itself was unremarkable, but Thomas uses the poem to depict a moment of peace as the train makes an unscheduled stop at Adlestrop station in Gloucestershire where he sits quietly and listens to the birds singing and enjoys being in the moment. The title of Abse's poem therefore refers directly to Thomas's poem. Joseph Cohen has described Abse's poem as 'a sort of curious conversation' with Thomas's poem because of the way it responds to, and differs from, Thomas's work (1).

## Form.

The first line of the second and fourth stanzas is indented, a subtle adjustment which has two main effects. Visually, the indentation draws the reader's eye and pulls their attention towards these sections of the poem. Thematically, the indentation keeps the poem moving forward, reminding the reader that time is passing and the train is moving. Like the train, the poem is moving on and the indented lines draw us back into the middle of the scene at the station, allowing the events to unfold seamlessly across all four stanzas. The form of 'Not Adlestrop' differs slightly from that of Edward Thomas's 'Adlestrop', which is made up of four stanzas each of four lines in length. Thomas's poem has a very balanced feel that is in contrast to the changeable format of Abse's poem. While 'Adlestrop' has a perfectly-balanced structure which matches its presentation of a moment of unspoilt peace and tranquillity, the structure of 'Not Adlestrop' is more haphazard, with stanzas of unequal length reflecting the excitement and intensity of the fleeting encounter the poem depicts.

## Lines 1 - 6.

The poem opens with a negative, the assertion that this is not Adlestrop (line 1), a claim which simultaneously links this poem to Edward Thomas's 'Adlestrop' and seeks to distance itself from the idyllic rural image presented by Thomas's poem. This opening sets the tone for the rest of the poem, which often places emphasis on what is not happening and on what is not being said. The poet builds on this approach by setting a scene in which things are not quite as they should be; the speaker has arrived **'too early'** (line 3) and finds himself on a deserted platform, and the train which arrives at the station is **'the wrong train'** (line 4).

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(1) Joseph Cohen, *The Poetry of Dannie Abse: Critical Essays and Reminiscences* (London: Robson Books, 1983), p. 40.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Lines 1 - 6 (continued).

The fact that this train is described as being 'surprised' (line 4) indicates that something unexpected is happening and foreshadows the speaker's own surprise at the way he is instinctively drawn towards the girl he sees looking out through the train window as the poem unfolds.

This first stanza is crucial to establishing the balance of power between the speaker and the girl on the train. The speaker is positioned on the platform, with the train window acting as a barrier between him and the girl who has caught his attention. The repetition of the word '**very**' (line 6) emphasises, somewhat childishly, the way in which the speaker is immediately attracted to the girl and is not afraid to admit to this attraction. This openness from the speaker continues in the stanzas that follow, as he goes on to describe how strongly he is drawn to this stranger.

## Lines 7 - 11.

This stanza is comprised of a single sentence, which seems to lend the poem a breathless nature, perhaps reflecting the speaker's excitement at this unexpected encounter and the speed at which the meeting occurs. The speaker describes himself as being '**all instinct**' (line 7), effectively absolving himself of responsibility for his actions by reducing them to an instinctive response to the beauty of the girl he sees through the train window. The revelation that the speaker is married adds another layer to the encounter, lending his open admiration of this stranger an illicit tone.

Non-verbal communication is crucial in these lines as the speaker describes the way he '**stared**' (line 8) at the girl, while the slightest of movements from her as she '**inclined her head away**' (line 8) becomes a point of focus for the speaker. However fleeting this meeting may be, it appears that both parties are aware of its significance. The way the girl attempts to turn away from the speaker suggests that she is aware of his gaze and is uncomfortable with it, perhaps sensing the speaker's apparent intensity. There is a sense of ambiguity here; the speaker interprets the girl's response as a reaction to the realisation that he is married, but gives no indication of why he believes the girl may have been able to recognise his status as a married man from her position on the train. Like the speaker, the girl's reaction is '**all instinct**' (line 8), a shared response which links the two together even at this early stage of the poem. The gaze, however, is one-way – the man gazes and the woman (knowing she is watched) looks away.

## Lines 12 - 15.

The focus returns initially to the speaker who remains in his position on the platform. We learn that in spite of his awareness of the girl attempting to turn her head away from him, he continues his '**scrutiny with unmitigated pleasure**' (line 13).

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Lines 12 - 15 (continued).

The word **'scrutiny'** is important here as it suggests that the speaker's gaze has an interrogative nature, which may be perceived as unwelcome by the person being subjected to this intense scrutiny. It is interesting that the speaker describes his time looking at the girl as pleasurable, indicating that he feels no remorse or guilt for staring so openly at someone else while he is married. For her part, the girl continues to appear reluctant to engage with the speaker and **'would not / glance at me in the silence'** (lines 14-5). Nevertheless, the speaker asserts that she is aware of the pleasure he is deriving from watching her and we might interpret her determination to avoid his gaze as an acknowledgement of the significance of this moment. It is unclear if this is a projection, but the first-person perspective lends weight to the man's assertion.

The presence of the **'clock'**, mentioned in the first line of the stanza, is also important here, reminding us that there is a time limit on this encounter. Time is fleeting and the fact that the speaker stands under the clock implies that time is, quite literally, hanging over him and lending a finite nature to the encounter. It also builds on the earlier statement that the speaker had arrived too early for the train, reminding the reader that had he not arrived at the wrong time then he would never have been there when this train arrived and would not have seen the girl at all. This is the shortest stanza in the poem (which has moved from six, to five and then four lines, perhaps indicating a slowing of activity in this moment).

Once again we are reminded that this is 'not Adlestrop', a reference which both connects to Thomas's poem and rejects it by reminding us that this unexpected moment has yielded a very different outcome to the unscheduled stop in Thomas's poem. In Thomas's poem the speaker uses the silences to listen to birdsong and enjoy his peaceful surroundings; in Abse's poem the **'silence'** (line 15) is a loaded one, filled with the tension of the speaker's illicit gaze.

## Lines 16-22.

The last stanza is the longest of the poem and is, arguably, where the most notable events of the poem take place. These final lines mark a turning point in this unspoken exchange between the speaker and the girl on the train. As the train **'heave[s] noisily'** to leave the station, the silence of the previous stanza is broken and the poem changes momentum. The girl appears to be filled with confidence by the train and we are told that **'only then'** (line 17) does she smile back at the speaker. The movement of the train, carrying her away from the speaker and ensuring that this exchange can only be a fleeting one, seems to embolden the girl so that she feels secure enough to engage with him, even if only briefly.

The speaker's use of repetition becomes significant again at this point as he describes first the girl, and then himself, as suddenly feeling **'daring and secure'** (lines 18 and 19).

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Lines 16 - 22 (continued).

The fact that he describes them both in this way reflects the sudden moment of unity between them as they finally exchange smiles, briefly finding them in sync. They mirror each other here, with the speaker waving **'back at her waving'** (line 19) as he watches the train pull away from him. Their progression to waving is perhaps inspired by the pair's increased confidence as the train gathers speed, knowing that nothing more can come of this shared moment. The 'atrocious speed' gathered by the train as it leaves the station draws the pace of the poem on from the languid enjoyment of the brief moments described by the speaker in the earlier stanzas. The train, like time, is moving quickly and is beyond either person's control.

We return again to Edward Thomas's poem in the closing lines of 'Not Adlestrop', as the train moves towards **'Oxfordshire or Gloucestershire'**, evoking 'the birds / Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire' that sing at the end of Thomas's work. The return to the route laid out in Thomas's poem may be read as a return to the expected journey, suggesting that the pair will now continue with their respective travels as if this encounter had never happened.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Lines 19 - 22 (continued).

These lines also present us with the death of the speaker's wife. Rather than the dance of earlier in the poem, however, death here is imagined as a bird's beak opening and a final sigh (i.e. a final breath) being released from it. Interestingly, Thomas describes this as a '**shedding**' of a sigh – precisely suggesting that something old and worn out is being got rid of by this process (in the way that a snake *sheds* its skin). Through this image, life itself seems to have been worn out. Indeed, the poem's final thought suggests just how insubstantial life is in any case: the wife's final breath is barely present at all, being '**no / heavier than a feather**' – insubstantial, delicate. Of course, the feather continues the poem's engagement with birds until the very end. But by the final line, there is nothing left of living birds – they have vanished. Instead, all that remains is a feather. Just like the woman's life in the poem, the life of the poem's imagery itself has drawn to a conclusion.

## COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

Katie Gramich has described Abse as ‘a versatile and complex writer, erudite at one moment, broadly comic the next’ and we can note these traits in play within ‘Not Adlestrop’ (2). There is an easiness, verging on playfulness, about the speaker’s enjoyment of this unexpected encounter with the girl on the train, evident in his open description of his unconcealed pleasure as he watches her. Yet the simplicity of this scene conceals the complexity of Abse’s work in the poem as he echoes the language of Edward Thomas’s ‘Adlestrop’, borrowing sufficiently from Thomas’s language to connect the two poems, but manipulating it to create a very different scene. Abse demonstrates his versatility by opening the poem with an inversion of Thomas’s opening line and ending his poem, as Thomas’s closes, with the train speeding towards ‘**Oxfordshire or Gloucestershire**’. What is significant are the events which unfold between these points, in the mid-section of the poem; here Abse’s own poetic voice becomes the most dominant. The idea of reusing words and the theme of duality is continued throughout the poem, however, in Abse’s use of repetition. As well as emphasising the connection between the speaker and the girl on the train, this repetition acts as a subtle reminder of the way Abse’s poem borrows from Thomas’s.

The language in the poem is accessible and confessional, the speaker talking honestly of his feelings as he sees the girl on the train. At times there is a casual tone to the poem, as when the speaker describes how he came to be at the station too early, and in the use of italics to emphasise certain words, such as how the girl is ‘**very, very pretty**’. Nevertheless, there are some moments where the language becomes more poetic, for example, when the speaker describes how the girl may have ‘**divined the married life in me**’. Such phrasing adds a romantic element to the poem, perhaps used by the poet to encourage the reader to imagine the emotional drama of the scene.

Sound is also a recurring theme in the poem which, although mentioned only briefly by the speaker, plays an important part in setting the tone for the events which occur. In contrast to Thomas’s poem where it is in the moments of silence, broken only by birdsong, that the speaker finds a sense of peace, the silence in Abse’s poem characterises a moment of tension and awkwardness. It is in ‘the silence of not Adlestrop’ that the girl turns her head in an attempt to avoid the speaker’s gaze, and in the noise of the train as it ‘**jolted**’ and moves forward that she feels the confidence to smile and then wave back at her admirer. The true moment of connection happens surrounded by the noise and speed of a moving train, creating a sense of irony within the poem.

The scene of the departing train propels the man and woman into the role of lovers, loathe to part, and recalls the many partings on platforms that became part of the iconography of the First World War, though the gender roles are inverted. One wonders if it is all a fantasy.

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(2) Katie Gramich, ‘Welsh Writing and the British Dimension’, in M. Wynn Thomas, ed., *Welsh Writing in English*, vol. VII (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 255–77: p. 258.

# FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What does the poem have to say about the importance of living in the moment?

How is body language important in the poem?

How do the reader's feelings about the speaker change as they read the poem?

The poem uses repetition throughout; what effect does this repetition have?

# PHOTOGRAPHS

- <http://www.amitlennon.com/amitsphotos/2014/10/8/dannie-abse-poet#.W4XSavZFzIU>
- <http://www.dannieabse.com/>

The first photo is an image of Abse as a younger man, pictured at Ogmores beach with his wife, Joan. The image offers an insight into the relationship between Dannie and Joan, who died following a tragic car accident in 2005.

The second photo depicts an older Abse in a relaxed moment at his North London home in 2007. The shot captures the hope and love of life which characterise Abse's work and demonstrate his resilience, even in the wake of personal loss.

- <https://www.mediastorehouse.com/steam/places/stations-halts-gloucestershire-stations-adlestrop-station/adlestrop-station-1933-11923252.html>

This image is a photo of the train station 'Adlestrop' as it looked when it was still in use in 1933. The station was closed in 1966 when all sidings were also removed from the stop. A sign from the railway line which bore the name 'Adlestrop' was moved to a bus shelter in the nearby town following the closure of the train station, along with a plaque which is engraved with Edward Thomas's poem about the station.

# LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Details of Abse's life and career, including information about his many publications and audio recordings of Abse reading his poem are available at:

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

The British Council Literature website offers a biography of Abse, along with a complete bibliography of his work and a list of the awards secured by Abse throughout his career:

<https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/dannie-abse>

A biographical summary, including some of Abse's literary influences and readings of his poems, can be found at:

<https://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/dannie-abse>

A thought-provoking 'in conversation' interview with a reflective Dannie Abse is available at:

[www.walesartsreview.org/in-conversation-with-dannie-abse/](http://www.walesartsreview.org/in-conversation-with-dannie-abse/)

All links are clickable



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August 2018



*We are grateful for the financial support of the College of Arts and Humanities, Swansea University, CREW - Centre for Research into the English Literature and Language of Wales, The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh Writing in English.*