

Dannie Abse

'Return to Cardiff'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

CONTENTS

- 3 SECTION 1 :**
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS
- 5 SECTION 2 :**
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM
- 13 SECTION 3 :**
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE
- 15 SECTION 4 :**
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK
- 15 SECTION 5 :**
PHOTOGRAPHS
- 16 SECTION 6 :**
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES
- 16 SECTION 7 :**
FURTHER READING

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Welsh-Jewish writer Dannie Abse (1923–2014) was a poet, novelist, playwright and a doctor. He once stated, ‘I like to think I’m a poet and Medicine my serious hobby’. His career as a physician and his wartime experiences substantially impacted the style, mood and subjects explored in his poetry. Though based in London for much of his career, his creative work offered an alternative perspective on place, which in turn invigorated discussions on identity in Wales for a new generation of poets.

Dannie Abse spent his early life in Cardiff before moving to London to pursue his studies in medicine. He was one of four siblings in a Welsh-Jewish family. Critically, his older brothers – Leo, a campaigning Labour MP and Wilfred, a respected psychiatrist – influenced his future creative work as a young boy. The presence of his brothers meant there were frequent discussions on Marx and Freud in the household. His parents were Rudolph and Kate Abse, a multilingual and musical couple who provided Abse with simulating conversation throughout his adolescence. His influences included Dylan Thomas who had ‘an influence on me, negatively, I wanted to avoid being too much like him’ as Abse has said in an interview¹ Abse’s early work was also influenced by Rainer Maria Rilke as evidenced by *The Poetry Foundation*.²

Dannie was one of the few children of Jewish descent to attend St Illtyd’s grammar school in Cardiff which was formally a Christian establishment. He then continued his education at the university of South Wales and Monmouthshire (now Cardiff University). He concluded his education at King’s College London before spending time at Westminster hospital. Similarly, Wilfred attended King’s College London and Westminster hospital which demonstrates the way in which his childhood influenced him as an adult. He began to work as a doctor in the 1950s before narrowing his ambitions to specialise as a chest doctor (1954–1989) at the Central Medical Establishment. Contemporary poetry and religion began to inspire his creative work through the poetry of T.S Eliot, in addition to the Bible. Indeed, Abse and Eliot exchanged correspondences with Eliot encouraging the young poet to pursue his creative aspirations.

(1) Phil Morris, ‘Dannie Abse | In Conversation’, *Wales Arts Review*, 2013

walesartsreview.org/in-conversation-with-dannie-abse

(2) *Poetry Foundation*, ‘Dannie Abse’, *Poetry Foundation*, 2021

poetryfoundation.org/poets/dannie-abse

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

There were two defining moments in the life of Dannie Abse which influenced his writing: his time in national service and the tragic circumstances surrounding the death of his wife. The first event occurred in 1951 when he was called up for national service during the Korean War (1950–1953). It should be noted that between 1947–63 all able-bodied men were called up for a standardised form of peacetime conscription. He stayed on as a medical officer until he progressed to Middlesex Hospital where he remained until the end of his career as a medical professional.

The second event was the death of his wife Joan Abse (nee Mercer) who died in 2005 following a car crash near their second home in Ogmere-by-Sea. Her death was a catalyst for his later poetry that concentrated on grief and mortality, while the loss of Joan was felt more widely by the creative community. She was a respected art historian and together they edited two books, *Voices in the Gallery: Poems and Pictures* (1986) and *The Music Lover's Literary Companion* (1988). Her abrupt death impacted his ability to write until 2007 when he published *The Presence*, a collection which explores the struggle of loss as well as human devotion.

His poetry collections include *The Presence* (2007), *White Coat, Purple Coat* (1989), *Selected Poems* (1970), *Pythagoras* (1979), *Way Out in the Centre* (1981) and *Running Late* (2006), for which he was awarded the Roland Mathias prize. Abse was an accomplished prose writer, and he drew on his own childhood experiences of Cardiff in *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve* (1954) and *There Was a Young Man from Cardiff* (1991).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'Return to Cardiff' evokes images of a journey and a return to a city which holds sharp memories for the speaker of the poem. Yet, the word 'Return' also implies a period of looking back and revisiting the past. In this way, the physical return to Cardiff by the poet immediately draws on his memories from childhood. The lack of the definite or indefinite article ('the' return or 'a' return) allows this return to stand for more than a single, specific visit: there is the possibility of multiple returns in the imagination. The internal to-ing and fro-ing between place of origin (and the past) and one's place in the present which is invoked in the poem's meditation on identity and memory. Some readers would be aware that Abse grew up in Cardiff and left the city to pursue his career in England early in his adult life. Even without this knowledge it is clear the speaker's ideas on identity – which are explored throughout the poem – are stained by nostalgia, and a sense displacement felt by the speaker on returning in fact or imagination to this former home-city.

Form.

The poem has seven stanzas. The number of lines vary in each section but this format is likely because of the restrictions the typesetter encountered while laying the poem out on the page for the anthology. The true form of the poem would have four lines in each stanza. The poem in the anthology appears more fragmented than the poet intended. The longer lines could imitate the thoughts of the speaker as he returns to Cardiff, in the same way nostalgia unexpectedly strikes and pulls us on a journey into our past. Each line indicates the way the speaker is seeing his hometown, with new and old eyes. However, the third and fourth line of each stanza interrupts the flow of the poem by punctuating each section with a one-or-two-word line. Each stanza follows a particular rhyme pattern with the first and last line of each section sharing an end-rhyme. Certain words are repeated throughout the poem to emphasis the way in which the poet feels an initial attachment to the city and his subsequent displacement such as '**my first**', '**unable**' and '**I**'. The fragmented language and grammar of the poem, chiefly in the opening stanza, can be viewed in two ways: to make sense of lingering memory as well as an attempt by the poet to immerse himself in the defining moments and imagery of his childhood.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The language used in the poem contributes to the establishment of a sorrowful tone and bleak atmosphere which is shown early in the narrative. Dai George writes in *“Return To Cardiff”: Dannie Abse Tribute*:

Though no one could miss the melancholy that clouds this homecoming, it would be easy to underestimate the unusual, fractured quality of the poem’s prosody. It appears to offer us a moving experience – one that any prodigal son might understand – but in fact does everything within its power, formally, to frustrate emotional purchase. Through hesitancy and interruption, the poem enacts a type of failed nostalgia. It is a numb poem, a mistimed poem, and a poem that almost disintegrates into ugly, fragmented non-poetry. As such, it is a poem better equipped than any other I can think of to convey the listless non-emotion of self-imposed exile.³

Each section offers a further glimpse into the childhood memories of the poet growing up in Cardiff which is contrasted by the modern city that he meets when he arrives at his hometown. In this way, readers are walking alongside the poet as he explores the city. They stand beside him throughout his shock and resentment at discovering how much the city has changed since he left home.

Lines 1-4.

The title establishes the speaker is on a journey to his hometown of Cardiff while the opening line is reminiscent of someone arriving at their destination. Despite this **“Hometown;”** with its semi-colon and inverted commas is at once distinguished from the preceding words that follow it. The word exists in isolation from the main body of the poem and this is accentuated by the stilted use of grammar throughout the stanza which prevents readers from settling into a natural rhythm. The form of the poem seems to remind readers of the way in which the poet feels out-of-step in his hometown.

The apathetic tone of the second part of the line: **‘well, most admit an affection for a city’** could excuse his sense of attachment to the city which he finds difficult to understand and consolidate with his childhood memories of the place. Thus, **‘affection’** is a docile verb which indicates slight enthusiasm and excitement, yet the language reveals the city as a mystifying place, only accessible to those who can understand it, such as Abse as a teenager and the streets he cycled on to school. While the speaker as a child would have found the streets familiar, and the overall tone of these lines are affectionate, the sense of displacement felt by the speaker as an adult can be read as disturbing, especially when all his memories are drawn from past failures, such as **‘botched love affair’**.

(3) Dai George, Wales Arts Review, *‘RETURN TO CARDIFF’: DANNIE ABSE TRIBUTE*, 2014
walesartsreview.org/a-tribute-to-dannie-abse-a-look-at-return-to-cardiff

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The second line abruptly submerges readers in nostalgia, or at least childhood memory. The **'affection'** is through the familiarity with which the poet connects his memories as a teenager to the **'grey, tangled streets'** and the further **'first everything'** which has informed his personality as an adult. This nostalgia is deliberate and distances the poet from the landscape as well as draws attention to the strangeness of the word **"Hometown"** where an intimate connection is tied to the people, landscape and memory. This has positive and negative associations, so the strangeness of the community is remembered in a way that passing tourists would not understand. For example, a street name would just be a landmark for a passing tourist, a place to visit and browse, while connections with **'Hometown'** would transform that street into **'my first cigarette'**. This is made stranger still through Abse as a Welsh-Jewish writer who grew up in a multiracial, yet still racially discriminatory, community. This is evidenced in other work but chiefly his *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve* (Abse, 1982), which provides readers an insight into his childhood in Cardiff.³

The term **'a city'** both claims and dismisses the city – by using the indefinite article it could be any city, any boyhood – yet it's interesting that **'a city'** seems to diminish his bonds rather than universalising an affection. The rhyming words **'city'** and **'pity'** and the dark language of **'grey, tangled streets'**, **'fool'** and **'botched love affair'** reveal a childhood which was less than idyllic, however, this familiarity, and any affection tied to it, is firmly situated in the past. So, **'a city'** could be any city but the speaker continues and reaffirms his connection to Cardiff by switching to a definitive article in **'the back lane'** but all these experiences are **'botched'** in some way.

Nonetheless, the way in which the second line submerges readers in nostalgia offers a monochromatic portrayal of a city which builds on the destructive language – **'fool'** and **'faded torments'** – used throughout the stanza. A cigarette is an item with an intense smell and its smoke blackens whatever it touches which is preceded by **'grey'**. The monochromatic picture is fulfilled by **'botched love affair'** which could, however loosely, be seen as a burnt heart. These two lines, connected by enjambment, seem to tie the two acts of smoking and heartbreak together in one picture punctuated by commas, almost imitating the inhaleds of a first-time smoker, breathing in deeply only to cough and stutter before attempting another puff (**'[inhale]my first cigarette / in the back lane, [cough] and fool [cough], [inhale]my first botched love affair'**). The final lines of the stanza use language like **'Faded'** which, after time, cigarette smoke eventually does to the room/landscape it has been frequently smoked in, suggesting that the speaker's memories have been visited more than once in **'self-indulgent pity'** outside of the city where recollections are **'faded'** by distance, as well as time. But his visit stirs up these memories, and Abse's use of short sentences: **'First everything.'** reveal the intensity in which they appear to the speaker. Despite this all attempts to concentrate on the positive aspects of his childhood are overshadowed in favour of the more violent and disturbing memories of youth, such as **'botched love affair'** and **'Faded torments'**.

(3) Dannie Abse, *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1983).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

It is important to note that the form of the poem changes in line three and focuses readers attention on the word '**cigarette**'. As mentioned, smoking is an activity which engages all the senses, from touch, taste to smell. In addition to this the item draws on the memories of the poet that he connected with his hometown. In doing so, line three becomes a moment in which the poet and his readers can pause and reflect on the past as well as on contemporary Cardiff.

Lines 5-9⁴.

Line five discusses the theme of cultural displacement in '**The journey to Cardiff seemed less a return than a raid**'. However, the use of '**seemed**' displaces any opportunity for a strong emotional reaction by the poet. This dispirited attitude is continued in the following lines which describe present-day Cardiff. These observations share many similarities with the abrupt remarks of a doctor's notebook where the main verb is conspicuously absent: '**the whole locus [is] smaller**' and '**Taff [is] now a stream**'. In addition to this, '**raid**' conjures images of a violent incursion with the aim of stealing or killing, recalling, perhaps, the war (Abse lived through air raids in Cardiff, and lost his best friend in one), or his brief dash home to capture some sense of self. His return home has become a '**gothic dream**' which recalls the monochromatic language in the first stanza. The word '**gothic**' has a loose connection to the films of Abse's childhood, thinking specifically of Hammer Horror which Abse would have grown up with, with its shadowed cinematography and threatening landscapes, yet, Cardiff's landscape is familiar to Abse but is now '**smaller**' and a '**joker's façade**'.

The poet repeatedly restrains himself from investing in the present city and instead offers recollections on his childhood which are tarnished by a voice of maturity where the city is smaller, and the '**mile-wide Taff**' is now a '**stream**' and the castle is not a '**black gothic dream**' but a '**decent sprawl**'. Moreover, '**mislaid identities**' link to the final images of the poem where the child that had once found Cardiff so enthralling no longer exists except in memory.

(4) Line numbers refer to the lines as printed here (including run-on lines).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The word **'locus'**, as defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, used in line six means 'a particular position or place where something occurs or is situated'.⁵ However, there is also a mathematical definition of the word which is a termination at which other points branch away and diverge to maintain an equal distance from its origins, as defined by the same dictionary, drawing on Abse's medical education which would have a foundation in mathematics. Cardiff appears smaller to the poet now that he is viewing the city as an adult, although the shrinkage is exaggerated: **'the mile-wide Taff'** becomes **'a stream'** and the once black castle of nightmares is a **'decent sprawl'** with a **'toy façade'** (alluding to the adult's knowledge that Cardiff Castle is a Victorian reconstruction built by the neo-medievalist Lord Bute). This language is condescending, indifferent, and lacklustre at best, especially considering it is his hometown that the poet is portraying with these images. Although, it should be noted rivers are natural markers which are in constant motion, both connecting Cardiff to a wider Wales as well as international waters. While Abse dwells on the castle more than the river in this stanza, water breaks were used as protection against invading forces in medieval times. In present-day Cardiff the river is now **'a stream'** so the word **'raid'** becomes even more threatening when faced with the possibility that defences are essentially down. Perhaps Abse is seeing his own identity as the castle and present-day Cardiff as an invading force which is difficult, if not impossible, to keep back.

The break in line 9 with **'some / black'** continues the disparate and disenchanting tone of the piece which is emphasised by **'a joker's toy façade'**, further connecting this stanza with stanza one and the monochromatic language established by the speaker's **'first cigarette'**.

Lines 10-13.

The third stanza opens with the word **'Unfocused'** that establishes the state of mind of the poet. Furthermore, the poet is disoriented by his inability to reaffirm his place in his hometown. In this way, the language used throughout this stanza develops the image of a desperate man grasping, often abstract, images to establish an uncertain connection with the landscape.

The list of imprecise fragments: **'Odds and ends'**, **'fringes'** and **'glimpses'** along with **'quit'** suggest the anxious way in which the poet is struggling to remember his Cardiff and the identity attached to those memories. **'White'** stands as a blank reminder that both he and the place have changed, and the poet acknowledges he must adapt to his changed surroundings if he wants to find a foothold in his hometown, his memories and future identity which is evidenced in **'suddenly aghast with certain news'**. This is continued in the following stanza where the speaker is **'unable to define anything I can hardly speak'** indicating a physical and emotional muteness at this revelation.

(5) Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 'locus', *Merriam-Webster*, n.d [merriam-webster.com/dictionary/locus](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/locus)

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Yet, his memories are **'unfocused'** and as the stanza reaches its apex these memories subsequently become more challenging to recollect and therefore assume a sinister tone of half-understood, intuited knowledge. Again the sense of perspective of the boy clashes with that of the adult, but at the end of this stanza the boy's view prevails. The face of his grandfather remains **'the white, enormous'**. At the end of this third stanza, the poem has moved through a full cycle of life, from a child playing in the streets, through a first love affair, conquering gothic fears, through allusions to war (raid) and the poet's profession (doctor) to the foreshadowing of death, here via the mortality of grandparents: **'suddenly aghast with certain news'**.

Lines 14–17.

The fourth stanza expresses a love for place which is stymied by the poet's inability to **'define'** his feelings (or memories?). This failure of language leads to silence **'I can hardly speak'** or rather the faltering and sprawling form of the poem. The central tension and paradox of the poem is expressed in this stanza: **'I still love the place for what I wanted it to be / as much as for what is unashamedly is'**. These two lines, which are tied together with enjambment, offer readers a poignant moment of self-awareness and recognition: the city as it **'unashamedly is'** is loved by the speaker. Loving **'the place for what I wanted it to be'** is ambiguous. Does the speaker refer to what he wanted the city to be on his return? Or is he recalling past aspirations for his hometown? In both the imagined place and the **'unashamed'** reality, there is perhaps an echo of the speaker himself – the man/boy he wanted to be/become and the person he knows he is. Moreover, the inclusion of the word **'is'** reinforces the acknowledgment of the ways in which the speaker is unhomed in present-day Cardiff, forever detached from his childhood self in this city **'of strangers, alien and bleak'**.

Lines 18–22.

The stanza opens on the poet confessing that he is **'Unable to communicate'** (an echo of the previous stanza which begins with **'Unable to define'**). He feels **'easily betrayed'** and **'uneasily diverted'** because his memories are no longer vigorous enough to sustain a sense of belonging to Cardiff, or because his memories are too multiple yet diffuse to be recalled with clarity when faced with present-day Cardiff. The frustration which is build up throughout the poem begins to unravel here only to explode in the following stanza through the onslaught of disturbing childhood memories. This approaching outburst is foreshadowed by the line **'as light slants down a different shade'** which suggests that the poet is looking at the landscape through a changed perspective.

Furthermore, **'mere sense reflections'** share a connection with language used in the third stanza where **'Unfocused voices'**, **'fringes caught'** and **'odds and ends'** where the poet was **'diverted'** more easily before the stanza culminates with the stark image of his grandfather, internalised here by the idea that those are just **'reflections'** and his attention is now fixed on his feelings of betrayal. His memories are **'anchored'** by **'waterscapes that wander, alter'** suggesting a shift in attitude towards his attachment to Cardiff, reaffirming the speaker as being in **'a city of strangers'**.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Indeed, the poet is now searching for a tangible connection to the landscape which is not exclusively tied to memory. In this way, water becomes a means of refuge as well as mayhem. The **'waterscapes that wander', 'anchored', and 'the Taff'** demonstrate the way in which the speaker is changing his attitude to the city. Yet, to be anchored by the Taff presents certain complications where the environmental, ecological and human intervention both alter that immediate landscape. For this reason, the word **'anchored'** does not instil the coveted sense of stability which the poet has been yearning for throughout this poem and the river acts a medium in which the poet can pause and reflect on his memories and the subsequent emotions they invoke which dominate the final stanzas of the poem. The following images of the **'noise of trams, gunshots'** are stopped by a reference to the past where **'what they once called Tiger / Bay'** is a way of distancing his sense of attachment to the city he finds difficult to understand in the present-day.

Lines 23–28.

The impressions formed all the way through this stanza offer a contradiction where **'illusory'** is in contention with the word **'real'**. For instance, **'that lost dark playground after rain'** takes on an ominous quality where the poet is **'lost'** in his memories in addition to the city. Yet, the poet repeatedly attempts to return to the present-day by **'anchoring'** himself alongside the river Taff.

It should be noted that **'only real this smell of ripe, damp earth'** which further emphasises the way in which the poet acquires reassurance by positioning himself firmly in the natural world (or at least one of the parks which border the river). The poet's reaffirmation follows two lines which expose a series of fragmented disturbing adolescent memories which are offered to readers through the clatter of violence. These fragmented images reveal the way in which adolescence is tarnished by an increased awareness of an unjust and tumultuous society. **'The noise of trams, gunshots'** empowers the poem with a different sensory characteristic where scent and the aural subdue narrative sense. This violence happens offstage, perhaps only conveyed via hearsay. The place **'they'** once called **'Tiger Bay'** (the area around the ports of Cardiff which was and is home to one of the oldest black communities in the UK) is perhaps stereotypically associated with rumours of violence. The community and district itself remains unrealised, a place once named Tiger Bay, whose new name (Bute Town or later Cardiff Bay), is not noted.

The inclusion of the sun provides the scents of deterioration a **'half exquisite and half plain'** quality, as if airing out an attic or photobook. In this way, the poet is now exploring his past through a learned understanding which is created by a new-found recognition of the city.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 29–32.

The final stanza recognises the **'other Cardiff had gone'**. The evocative metaphor which reduces the present-day Cardiff to **'tinned resemblances'** of his more vividly remembered (and therefore fresher) city. **'Tinned resemblances'** refers to tinned food – a commodity of great importance particularly after the Second World War, symbolising modernity, mass production, convenience and – the sense conveyed here by Abse – something lacking in authenticity, immediacy and taste or nuance. In this way, the opening lines share a similarity with the phrase *smoke and mirrors*, or **'façade'**, a word which draws readers back to one of the central themes of the poem (cultural displacement). Yet, it is no accident that the rhyme scheme for this stanza employs the words **'gone'** and **'on'** to indicate that the poet feels his identity has been impacted following his return to the city. Yet, **'on'** implies that he will move on after his journey to Cardiff has reached a conclusion. Dai George identifies a 'psychological disintegration'⁶ in the poem and this is demonstrated in the final two lines of the poem where the language takes on a spectral quality as **'The boy I was not and man I am not / met'** converge for a second before walking forward into an ever-changing future. This meeting exposes questions on how time is represented throughout the poem, especially in the face of memories and places which are already gone. It should not be possible for the two figures to meet in this manner and yet in the overlapping memories sparked by places known in the past and visited in the present, the ghosts of Abse's selves meet. Yet even this meeting is denied in the very moment it is evoked: for the meeting takes place between **'the boy I was not'** and **'the man I am not'** further problematizing the nature of memory and identity. Yet in the mirroring of the language (**'was not' / 'am not'**), the two imagined figures, or doppelgangers, are brought into transitory contact in the emplaced memory of the speaker.

(6) Dai George, Wales Arts Review, *'RETURN TO CARDIFF': DANNIE ABSE TRIBUTE*, 2014
walesartsreview.org/a-tribute-to-dannie-abse-a-look-at-return-to-cardiff

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The poem explores themes on cultural identity and displacement that are tied to a landscape. Yet, the poem also suggests the way in which memory can deteriorate and change over time. In this way, the speaker shares an exaggerated perspective of youth where places, which once appeared larger and grander to him as a child, now seem to be condensed and percolated through an adult perspective. The gothic imagery that pervades the poem furthers this sense of a childhood which is unhomely and distanced by memory and time where the castle changes from its **'gothic façade'** to a **'decent sprawl'**, and the image of giants is diminished. The spectral figure of the grandfather shares an association with the image of giants, where it is his death, or breakdown (**'white, enormous face'**) which the speaker remembers rather than any happy memories of their time together. The poem moves through a full cycle of life, from a child playing in the streets, through to the foreshadowing of death, here via the mortality of grandparents: **'suddenly aghast with certain news'**.

The poem can be read as an extended analysis on identity which is explored by the poet asking the question: who am I? Dannie Abse hopes to answer this question by returning to Cardiff to reaffirm his identity. However, the natural map of Cardiff has irrevocably changed where his childhood area of Cardiff is firmly situated in the past by the words, **'once called'** in line 24, leaving him unable to entirely reconcile his identity, or return to the Cardiff of his past through the words, **'smoke in the memory... tinned resemblances'**. So, he must literally move on from the place, as well as emotionally.

The form of the poem accentuates the feelings of frustration which this question provokes in the poet. Dai George argues: 'Abse communicates such psychological disintegration through a stark, frustrated music. The rebarbative diction – full of confusing elisions, dangling lists and clauses in disagreement – conveys the feeling of homelessness with greater power than any polished eloquence ever could.'⁷

The poem demonstrates the way in which the poet is overwhelmed by the changes which adversely impact his perspective on – and feelings of attachment to – his hometown. For this reason, present-day Cardiff takes on a strange and unfamiliar characteristic that only aggravates feelings of displacement and cultural exile experienced by the poet. This characteristic is demonstrated by the lines **'Faded torments; self-indulgent pity'** and **'a city of strangers, alien and bleak'** where the city only alienates the poet and leaves him unable to merge all aspects of his identity.

(7) Dai George, Wales Arts Review, *'RETURN TO CARDIFF': DANNIE ABSE TRIBUTE*, 2014
walesartsreview.org/a-tribute-to-dannie-abse-a-look-at-return-to-cardiff

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The final two lines of the poem are perhaps its most striking. Moreover, these two lines attempt to provide a resolution to the troubling experiences which the poet has confronted throughout the duration of his journey. This is so he can leave his hometown and re-determine a future identification which is not exclusively reliant on Cardiff. Thus, the meeting between **'the boy I was and the man I am not'** shows Abse distinguishing between his childhood and adult persona. This connection is emphasised by the repetition of **'I'** where the man and boy both walk on, although the line is ambiguous and offers no resolutions to the speaker's sense of frustration which has dominated the poem.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

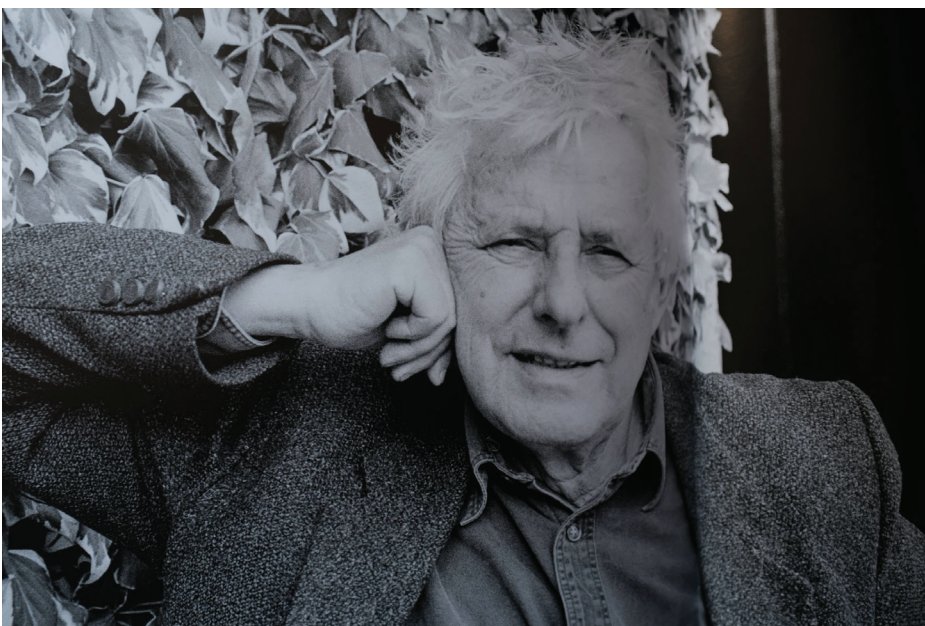
- In what way is memory evoked when exploring tensions between childhood and adulthood?
- In what way does the repetition of specific words or images contribute to a sense of emotional distance in the poem?
- What possible meanings can be drawn from the concluding two lines of the poem?
- How does the speaker perceive his identity following his return to Cardiff?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5

(links active August 2021)

All links are clickable



Photograph courtesy of Bernard Mitchell.

Bernard Mitchell was born in Morriston, Swansea and has worked in newspapers for thirty years as a photographer. Bernard Mitchell is responsible for incorporating and developing the Welsh Arts Archive and holds the copyright to all the images within it.

bernardmitchell.co.uk/biography

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

You can find more information about Dannie Abse, including a reading of 'Return to Cardiff' by the poet: Wales Arts Review on 'RETURN TO CARDIFF':
DANNIE ABSE TRIBUTE, 2014

walesartsreview.org/a-tribute-to-dannie-abse-a-look-at-return-to-cardiff

SECTION 7

FURTHER READING

Dannie Abse, *Welsh Retrospective*, Archard, Cary (ed) (Bridgend: Seren Books, 2009).

Dannie Abse, *There was a Young Man from Cardiff* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 2001).

Dannie Abse, *Intermittent Journals* (Bridgend: Seren, 1994).

Bernard Mitchell, *Pieces of a Jigsaw: Portraits of Artists and Writers of Wales* (Swansea: Parthian Books, 2017).



Dr R. S. Phillips

*CREW, Swansea University
August, 2021*



We are grateful for the financial support of Swansea University, The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh Writing in English.