Let's go to Barry Island

– by Idris Davies –

Background Information

The National Library of Wales entry on the author:
http://yba.llgc.org.uk/en/s2-DAVI-IDR-1905.html

1912 = Thompson's Switchback Railway Co.Ltd. opened the 'Figure 8' at Barry Island which later became the centre piece of the Barry Fairground.
http://www.angelfire.com/ga/BobSanders/CDFF3.html

Photos of Barry Island and Porthcawl across the years. Includes beach scenes and donkey rides (45).
http://www.walesonline.co.uk/lifestyle/nostalgia/63-marvellously-nostalgic-photographs-show-9324227

Hymns of Pantycelyn: WILLIAMS, WILLIAM (1717-1791), Methodist cleric, author and hymn-writer. 'Williams of Pantycelyn' was the chief hymn-writer of the Methodist awakening in Wales, and much of the success of Welsh Methodism must be attributed to the popularity of his hymns. See *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*: http://yba.llgc.org.uk/en/s-WILL-WIL-1717.html

Soup-kitchens – places where poor people can go to get a free hot meal.
https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=_IeuBwAAQBAJ&pg=PA7&lpg=PA7&dq=soup+kitchens+idris+davies&source=bl&ots=c1fz-WTvmz&sig=ezAAnZVDHe2_D8FYclzPebgvgxc&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi7hNLSypjKAhWHxRQKHUgVACAQ6AEIMTAC#v=onepage&q=soup%20kitchens%20idris%20davies&f=false

Phil Carradice, *Idris Davies, poet of the Depression*:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/wales/entries/d167d8a1-5a27-36af-aa9f-53adbf6f0838

Activities

N.B. The intention is deliberately to move from a fairly superficial reading of the poem to a fuller and deeper understanding of the social and political context of the poem.

A

A detailed look at the language will probably narrow down the choices to a husband. It is important to establish early on a possible speaker and any implied warmth in the relationship. They are **both** in need of a break, it seems. Learners may be able to identify more about the relationship between the speaker and 'Maggie fach' by considering the words shaded in yellow. Learners could discuss:

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- the pleading tone employed by the speaker and what this might suggest about their relationship
- the different ways he tries to persuade her throughout the poem and the effect of using the plural pronouns 'we' and 'our' throughout
- what he suggests will happen if they don't make the train and the effect of the hyperbolic onomatopoeia of 'howling'
- the effect of the imperative 'leave the washing' and how the speaker tries to make the contrast between their home life and the pleasures of Barry Island
- the symbolism of 'rose' and 'red lips' and how this adds to the persuasive tone of the poem.

B

A way into the poem. Learners may come to recognise that if attractions are beneficial for the children the adults may have some relative peace for a time, so the two categories are not mutually exclusive.
Figure Eight: see https://www.flickr.com/photos/trainsandstuff/16600697651
https://www.flickr.com/photos/trainsandstuff/17161725538
http://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/400670
Picture 13 shows a very crowded Barry Island beach on August Bank Holiday 1938:
https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=SWYqVyuxLDcC&pg=PA19&lpg=PA19&dq=idris+davies+barry+island+politics&source=bl&ots=jE7d6Ybhhi&sig=6y_e_8ahMmFqOs-NY-RFJRUspJo&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi7u42Y0JnKAhWISRoKHRbkDocQ6AEITTAG#v=onepage&q=idris%20davies%20barry%20island%20politics&f=false
(The original Turkish and Persian word was *sherbert* or *serbet*, which has led to the variant spellings.)
Other possibilities for discussion could include:

- how the speaker uses 'one day' to persuade Maggie
- the listing of the attractions and what each one suggests, 'sherbert' could perhaps be exotic and a treat, what do 'buns' and 'paper hats' suggest here?
- the description of the Figure Eight as a 'rattling ride', the onomatopoeia here suggests excitement but also something more about the rides on Barry Island, some learners may pick up the very different nature of rides then and now
- Idris Davies' poetry has been described as 'colloquial and conversational', how do the shaded words show this?
- consider 'tea on the sands', what images does this conjure up? Although context is not assessed here, learners should be encouraged to make the connection between the hardness of everyday life at this time and how Barry Island is made to seem like an escape

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- 'the sun goes down beyond the rocky islands' shows the end of their day out but what else could it symbolise?

C

These phrases have been highlighted to draw attention to the way the speaker continues to try and persuade Maggie to come to Barry Island and leave her worries behind. The poet uses imagery throughout. Learners should be encouraged to look at the effect of the sound imagery in the first lines and the personification in the last lines.

D

Some learners may need to be prompted about the way washing would have been carried out in the 1920s and 1930s:
http://ruthlace.blogspot.co.uk/2009/02/washing-clothes-in-1920s-and-30s.html
References to miners using any land they had for chickens etc.:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/wales/entries/11a7a4e6-ebf2-3da8-a7cb-55644692ec18
The website: http://www.wales.nhs.uk/documents/090203historypublichealthen[1].pdf gives some background about the conditions at the time, particularly the section: The Onset of the Great Depression. Trade unions, chapels and charity groups may have provided rival soup kitchens. Although context is not assessed in this assessment it is important for learners to have some knowledge about the time the poem was written and what life was like for people at this time. What kind of image of life at that time is Idris Davies creating here? What words and phrases help to create that image? What is the effect of the contrast between 'big brown bag' and 'big black tips'?

E

The poem has featured on posters which have been widely distributed, with the format perhaps suggesting an entirely happy day out at Barry Island. Some social and historical context (for the keeping of chickens, the coal mining industry, coal tips and soup kitchens) may be necessary for learners to appreciate the poem and understand more fully the contrast that Barry Island could provide for families living in the mining communities.

F

The singing could be seen as simple enjoyment, keeping up spirits at the time of the General Strike, sharing music which is deeply rooted in the local community, holding on to traditions against erosion and exploitation.
In any case, the crucial point is that they are not rejecting their background and culture in the Valleys, but finding pleasure and strength in it.

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G

It may be helpful to invite a variety of readings of the poem, and for learners to discuss how far the shorter lines convey a particular mood/ create a particular effect.

H

By this stage the learners should be clear this is not an unequivocally happy poem about a day trip to the seaside. They can now explore more fully the choices made by Idris Davies in writing about a potentially happy trip in the midst of extremely serious economic and social problems.

These Teachers' Notes, provided to support the teaching and learning of GCSE English Literature, contain some ideas which teachers could use to stimulate discussion and debate, in conjunction with other materials and sound classroom teaching. Context is not assessed in this non-examination assessment. We cannot guarantee the accuracy of external websites.