

Write an appreciation of the work of any C19th or C20th Welsh author, showing how their work reflects the dramatic social changes effected by one of the following: Methodism, the First World War, the mining industry.

This assignment is based on the novel *Black Parade*, written by Jack Jones. Originally published in 1935 and republished in 2009 by the Library of Wales.

Jones uses the life-knowledge that comes from being a miner's son, a miner, a soldier in the First World War, a political activist and a member of a close-knit mining community to write a story which is as much about him as it is about the characters in the book. The book is based in the mining town of Merthyr Tydfil, one of many similar towns that expanded rapidly in the coalfields of South Wales, and which was also Jones' home town. He has carefully, successfully and silently woven his own history throughout the pages of the novel. Never more so than in the central character of Saran, short for Sarah Ann, who was Jones' own mother and the title he originally gave to the book right up to the point of publication. The book can be read on several levels, but its real strength comes from the inciteful way in which Jones develops his characters, introduces real contemporary historical figures who underpin the key messages of social change within the book and give a platform on which Jones can then place the thoughts and reactions of his historical characters. Jones is representative of a small but significant group of (mostly) male writers who came from the working-class backgrounds synonymous with industrial South Wales at the first half of the last century. A lot of them were barely literate as children, such was the long history of sending children down coal mines and into factories instead of sending them to school, but this did not stop them from learning to express themselves, giving them a voice with which to tell their stories to readers far outside of coal towns like Merthyr. Jack Jones's *Black Parade* provides insight into the lives of ordinary working-class people of the South Wales coalfields spanning a period of half a century from the 1880s to the 1930s. The appreciation that follows will look at the impact social change had on the lives of the miners and their families in that period and the key events that drove those changes.

At the start of the book, Jones introduces the main characters and in doing so also gives the reader a first taste of the issues that confront the people of Merthyr. Glyn and Dai are brothers, both young adults, not yet married, and working underground as miners. It is through them and Glyn's future wife Saran, that Jones paints a very clear picture of life in

Merthyr for the majority of its inhabitants. Despite having only a few years of education before starting to work at the pit, Glyn remembers being taught that Merthyr is the second largest town in Wales. This is not at all surprising as Merthyr at that time was akin to the American gold-rush, with incomers coming from all over Wales and as far away as Ireland and Italy, drawn by the promise of big money to be earned at the many collieries and steelworks. This influx of people put a huge strain on the infrastructure of the town with overcrowding being commonplace. Beds were in short supply which often meant that they were used by the night shift whilst the day shift was working, and vice versa. Alcohol played a large part in the daily life of the residents of Merthyr and a substantial proportion of the first chapter talks of drinking, by both men and women, in the very many public houses in the town. There is a sense of lawlessness, with fighting and illegal gambling being commonplace. Not all incomers are drawn to this lifestyle, and Jones identifies them as being, '...the backbone of Nonconformity, which was daily increasing its power for the attack on the Established Church in Wales.' Other key topics appear in the opening chapter, one of which is health care and support for the less abled. The brothers still live at home with their father, Frank, who is confirmed to his bed due to illness and Marged, a friend of their late mother, who came to look after the family when she realized that her job as a tram woman at the pithead was getting beyond her. There is a short reference by Glyn to a new hospital that has been built in the area although he views it with a high degree of scepticism and refers to it as '...a butcher's shop...'. Through Glyn's girlfriend, Seran, we learn how women also worked hard in manual jobs but for whom the idea of gender equality hadn't been invented and we get our first insight into how physically and mentally strong these women were and the important dynamic they brought to family life. Finally, Jones briefly describes the way in which the miners were treated by the colliery owners who allowed the men to work double or treble shifts and who would replace them if they refused to work the long hours underground.

Further insight into the fighting and illegal gambling is provided by Saran's twin brothers, Harry and Shoni. Of the two, Harry is the fighter. He takes on and wins a fight with an Irishman who is known for killing a previous opponent. Violence of this level appears to have been commonplace and was accompanied by illegal betting on the outcome of the fight. Shoni is portrayed as a petty thief, an opportunist who often stole from Harry and other members of his family to fund his addiction to gambling. In the eyes of the non-conformists, drastic measures are needed to curb the drinking and bring people back to a sober, God-fearing lifestyle. We first learn of this when Glyn and Saran attend a service

at a non-conformist chapel to hear a well-known preacher describe how the battle for Sunday closing in Wales has been won, meaning that no drinking establishment would be allowed to legally serve alcohol on Sundays. A visit by Glyn to his married sister, Mary, underlines the terrible living conditions of many. Her family is living in a condemned house which is in danger of being engulfed by the ever-growing slag heap from the colliery. They have nowhere to go due to the lack of housing in the town and the fact that what does become available is taken by those willing to pay over the usual going rate. With the overcrowding and the unsanitary conditions in which people lived, it is not surprising that there is an outbreak of typhoid fever, the novel echoing the reality of endemic infectious diseases in Merthyr around that time, and Mary and her three children die. Even Glyn's own home is not much better, the twelve families in his row of terraced houses sharing three earth closets next to a stinking polluted stream teeming with large rats.

Saran was illiterate, she saw no benefit for her in being able to read and write. She had worked in the brick factory from the age of ten until she married Glyn and believed herself a good wife and mother, able to cook, clean, sew and knit and manage a family. By the time Saran had six children school had become compulsory and failure to send your children meant a visit from an official, or worse still, a summons. Some argued that they didn't want their children to be educated in English, concerned about what it would do to their native language. Saran didn't want her children to be educated. She planned for the boys to leave school at twelve and join their father in the pit where they would earn good money that would help support the household. Around the time that her second son was about to join his eldest brother and father in the pit, Saran started to pay attention to the rumblings about a new miner's union. She wasn't about to ask Glyn directly as he had previously expressed his annoyance when Saran he taken an interest in anything political as he believed that to be a topic for men, not women. So, to gain information, Saran was forced to rely on her second eldest son, Benny, to tell him about the huge gatherings of miners from far and wide who came to hear William Abraham, MP, and trade unionist (usually known by his bardic name of Mabon) speak. At this time, there was a sea-change in the way that the miners started to view themselves. They were more organized than ever before, becoming more militant, less accepting of the of their lot in life and fought hard against the sliding scale of pay that the mine owners wanted to introduce that linked their pay to demand for coal. For six months in 1898 the families of miners suffered, begging for food to survive only for the strike to end and the mine owners to implement

the sliding scale anyway. Such was the militant feeling that remained among the miners that they joined the unions in unprecedented numbers. It took Saran two years to recover the family finances after the strike but with her Glyn and two of her boys now earning well, she was able to move the family to better housing not once but twice. Each time improving on living conditions culminating with the second move having an indoor bath and an outside toilet that was only shared with one other family. This socially upward move saw a change in Saran herself, she became more respectable in her dress and way of speaking. Merthyr too was also changing with the introduction of electric trams, motor cars, new housing and large public buildings were appearing one of which was the new Theatre Royal and Opera house. From long before she married Glyn, Saran had loved going to the theatre, it was a form of escape from the harsh realities of life in Merthyr, even when the theatre itself was nothing more than a rickety shack.

Just when life seems to be looking up for Saran and the town, the Boar War brought new challenges. Benny, Glyn and Saran's oldest son, buoyed up by the jingoist talk of the time, upped and enlisted in the army. He lied about his age as so many young men did at the time. His mother learnt of this from a letter he wrote to her from the depot in Cardiff. The son who was educated well enough to write to his illiterate mother continued writing to her from as far away as Africa and India. Disaster struck Saran's brother Harry about the same time. He had continued his life of drinking and fighting for money and one day, whilst under the influence of alcohol, he lost his leg after an accident with a shunting engine. The Christian Revival swept across South Wales, causing many to repent and change their ungodly ways, one of these unlikely converts was Harry who embraced his newfound faith completely.

The breakup of the family that started when Benny went away to war, continued after his return with the oldest of his brothers marrying or moving away for work. The political change that began with the six-month strike had continued to grow in the form of socialism and an even stronger Miners Federation were preparing to fight the newly formed companies that had taken over from the original colliery owners. Saran only had one daughter, Jane, it was on her wedding day that the Eight Hours Act was passed putting an end to the doublers and treblers that her father and uncle Dai had worked as young men. Not long after the Eight Hours Act, came the fight for a minimum wage which the miners won after a stoppage of just six weeks and that made a name for Frank Hodges, a young miner's leader. All of the changes to working hours and the introduction of minimum wage did nothing to make the mines a safer place to work. For as long as men

have been mining coal there have been tragedies underground. It is not surprising that Jones chose the largest and most deadly mining accident in the history of the United Kingdom to cast a shadow over the lives of his fictitious family. Two of Saran and Glyn's sons lost their lives in the Senghenydd mining disaster.

Not even a whole year passed between Senghenydd and the start of World War I. Benny, still a reservist, is called up immediately and four of his brothers enlist before the Christmas of 1914. The war took two more of Saran's sons and Benny's arm before the Armistice, her only son-in-law lost his sight and another son received wounds from which he was never to fully recover. Having won the war, the miners might have been forgiven for thinking that life was going to get better for them, but it didn't. Reparations coal that Germany provided to France and Italy meant that Welsh coal was not needed, and men struggled to find work and what they could get was only half-time. Of further concern to the miners was the Sankey report which they feared would see the ownership of the coal mines being nationalised. Benny is not impacted by the lack of work for the miners. When he returned from the war, he set himself up as an insurance agent, with some financial support from Saran. His business grew as did his success to the point where he was able to employ a household maid. His drive to be upwardly mobile was matched by that of his wife who saw to it that his eldest two children won scholarships to the higher-grade school. Saran's life was also changing. She joined the Christian Sisterhood where she spent two evenings a week. She still regularly attended her much-loved theatre but went more often to the cinema once the 'talkies' arrived. In Merthyr and beyond, mines and steelworks were closing, and the younger generation looked for work outside of Wales. Local publicans were suffering due to the lack of mining and steel working clients and the economy of Merthyr was declining. So bad was the situation one Christmas, that Saran turned to the newspaper fund and Quaker's relief foundation for help which she shared with her daughter and daughter-in-law to top up the help they received from the British Legion. As the same time as the rest of the family was struggling, Benny's boys continued their education by going to university and Benny bought himself a new car. The government commissioned an enquiry into the employment situation in South Wales which concluded that unemployed males under the age of forty-five should move to more prosperous districts. State benefits helped Glyn, first with a small amount of dole money and then in the form of State pension which has been introduced a couple of decades earlier. The book ends with the death of Harry who, having been saved, is a completely different character to that at the start of the book.

In conclusion, *Black Parade*, is a wonderful insight into the everyday lives of the miners and their families in the South Wales coalfields over a period of fifty years. Throughout the book the character of Saran is depicted as possessing immense internal strength. It is this strength that ensures that she and her family survive through some very difficult times. The lot of a miner was always a difficult one, long hours spent working in difficult and often dangerous conditions for colliery owners who treated them as being totally expendable. It was not until the rise of the trade union movement and the creation of the Miners Federation did they gather enough strength and self-belief to take on their employers to ask for better working conditions and a more consistent method of remuneration. Historically, men involved in heavy manual labour were often heavy drinkers, it was part of their culture. This was true also for the miners of Merthyr and the Christian Revival that swept across South Wales did some good in helping to change this culture, but it certainly did not remove it completely. At the start of the book there is an expectation for son to follow father into the pits after receiving only the most basic of education. As the story progresses, we can see that education becomes more valued especially so in the case of Benny's sons who attend university. Saran is keen to improve her living conditions and those of her family, eventually being able to move them away from deplorable housing conditions to one which is considered modern and sanitary. At the same time the town too is improving with new public buildings, parks and theatres for people to use during their increasing amounts of leisure time. Whilst the strikes that accompanied the new wave of political activism made life difficult for miners and their families, it was World War I and its aftermath that was the beginning of the end for the mining industry. Those miners that went to fight and survived were met on their return with an industry in decline from which it never recovered.