CREW

Dannie Abse

'A Night Out'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

Swansea University
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(page 313–4 of *Poetry 1900–2000*)

CREW

CONTENTS

3 SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

4 SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

8 SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

9 SECTION 4 :
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK

9 SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS

10 SECTION 6 :
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

11 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.)

Dannie Abse (1923–2014) was born and grew up in Cardiff to a Jewish family. He attended a Catholic secondary school before studying medicine at the Welsh National School of Medicine in Cardiff and later at King's College London, where he qualified in 1950. He practiced as a chest doctor, and, having married his wife, Joan Mercer, in 1947, lived with her and their children in London for the entirety of his career. Nevertheless, Abse maintained strong connections with Wales through extended family, friends, his writing, and his love of Cardiff City FC. Later in life, he spent much time at his second home in Ogmore-by-Sea.

In addition to a successful medical career, Abse was a prolific writer of poetry, prose and drama. He started writing as a teenager, having been exposed to politics and ideas by his older brother Leo (who was later a prominent Labour MP). He was particularly influenced by Stephen Spender's and John Lehmann's *Poems for Spain*, an influential anthology about the Spanish Civil War, published in 1939, which contained some of the leading poets and thinkers of the day, including W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice and Margot Heinemann. Although a secular Jew, the events of the Second World War profoundly affected Abse: he later said that 'Auschwitz made me more of a Jew than Moses ever did.'[1] Against the backdrop of the jaded cynicism of much post-war English- language poetry, Abse's is a sensitive, urbane, cosmopolitan voice, with a deep concern with international history and politics and their impact on everyday life and lived experience. Also, unlike many Welsh poets of his era, growing up in Cardiff and later living in London, Abse's urban lifestyle made him notably uninterested in matters of the natural world and environment, and more concerned with the ironies and complexities of modern urban life.

(1) Meic Stephens, *The New Companion to the Literature of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), p. 4.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

Abse's enduring popularity as a poet is perhaps partly due to his unpretentious style. This was one of the features he did share with his contemporaries in English 'Movement' poetry, such as Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin: an unembellished, almost conversational tone and diction. Often, this ostensible simplicity and directness of form belied a deep, oblique emotional and thematic complexity simmering beneath the surface. This is particularly the case with 'A Night Out', a poem from his 1968 collection *A Small Desperation*. The title refers rather off-handedly to a night out at the cinema with his wife Joan: the use of the indefinite article suggests this could be a night on the town like any other. However, the cool matter-of-factness of the phrase ironically disguises the chilling significance of this night in particular.

Form.

'A Night Out' recalls an evening in which Abse and his wife visit the cinema to watch a Polish war film about Auschwitz. (Though it is not named, the film is almost certainly *Pasażerka* (Passenger), dir. Andrzej Munk, 1963.) The poem is stylistically restrained: that is, not embellished with overt lyrical or poetic elaborations. Instead, and in contrast with the emotional charge of the subject matter, Abse maintains a coolly detached lyrical voice throughout. The poem makes no recourse to melodramatic or hyperbolic diction or stylisation. This is particularly significant given that Abse was himself of Jewish heritage, and later wrote that the film had 'assaulted' him.[2] It is worth quoting Abse himself on this at length:

> I quit that cinema in London's Oxford Street in an undefined rage and needed, soon after, to write a poem about the experience. Such was the charge of my emotion that rightly or wrongly I felt that I did not wish to make any pretty artifice out of it. I did not want to be lyrical about such a theme. I wanted to be as truthful as possible, to avoid all kinds of artificiality, to say what I felt and to say it plainly. I wanted the verisimilitude of prose – and so wanting that I used rhythms associated with prose and of course, as prose writers do, I eschewed rhyme.[3]

The poem contains three stanzas of equal length. In addition to its prose-like language, the form gives the poem almost the structure of a short story, with a beginning, middle and end: the before, during and after the screening of the film. The only concession to overt poetic stylisation is the fact that each stanza contains eleven lines: an unusual stanzaic form, but perhaps a reference to the 'eleventh hour' from the Biblical Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard.[4]

(2) Dannie Abse, 'Rhyme', in Cary Archard (ed.), *Dannie Abse: A Sourcebook* (Bridgend: Seren, 2009), p. 43.
(3) Dannie Abse, 'Rhyme', p. 43.
(4) King James Bible, Matthew 20:1–16.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1–11.

In contrast to the enormity of the poem's theme, its opening phrasing is notably informal and unceremonious, having the tone of someone recounting an anecdote: **'Friends recommended the new Polish film / at the Academy in Oxford Street.'** That said, despite the understated tone, the shortened, clipped sentences suggest that the speaker is uneasy about continuing. The lines create a mood of anticipation and apprehension of what is to come: indeed, like the **'wind'**, they offer **'faint suggestions'**, subtle allusions and echoes of the poem's dreadful theme. It is worth noting that the **'Academy'** was a well-known arthouse cinema in Soho, and reference to a visit there would imply a viewing of an artistically important or critically acclaimed film, rather than popular escapism. Moreover, the cinema was situated on the corner where Oxford Street meets Poland Street, an area of Polish Protestant refuge after the Polish Counter-reformation of the eighteenth century: a reference that sets up a parallel with the experience of Jews fleeing Germany during the Second World War. The speaker observes the **'ever melancholy queue'** outside the cinemas of Soho. The image of people queuing to enter the gas chambers is of course one of the terribly resonant images of the Second World War, and indeed *Pasażerka* contains dramatic scenes of this. The general mood of unease and foreboding is reinforced with pathetic fallacy: not only the **'wind'**, but also **'rain'**. The sound of the **'accordion'** is also notable; the accordion was originally a German invention, and is an instrument normally associated with the gaiety of social gatherings – in stark contrast to the solemnity of the film the speaker is about to see.

From line 6, the speaker and his wife enter the cinema. The phrase **'velvet dark'** evokes the plush opulence of the Academy: this is in stark contrast to the **'nightmare'** of the concentration camp on the black-and-white screen, and the speaker notes that he and his partner are 'uneasy' about their sense of comfort. Like the image of the **'melancholy'** queues outside the cinema – rendered crassly insignificant in contrast with the queues to the gas chambers – this develops one of the poem's central conceits: the drawing of comparisons between the immense, unspeakable suffering of the Holocaust, and the comforts of living a modern, middle-class lifestyle in fashionable London. The speaker is profoundly aware of his comfortable detachment from the scenes on screen, and this makes him uncomfortable about the ethics of watching a film about such suffering. The speaker deliberately demystifies the experience: in contrast to the way cinema is so often romanticised by filmmakers and cinemagoers as a site of pleasurable escape, the speaker draws attention to the objective absurdity and almost scientific detachment of the experience of **'peer[ing] through the cut-out oblong window'** and seeing **'the human obscenity in close-up.'** Nevertheless, despite the sense of suspicion and detachment, the speaker confesses to having been affected by the film; the images are **'almost authentic'**: **'Certainly we could imagine the stench.'** Given the enjambment used throughout this stanza, this final line, standing alone without rhyme, has considerable impact.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 12-22.
The second stanza continues the description of the experience of being inside the cinema, and the speaker begins to be absorbed by the imagery on screen: **'we forgot the barbed wire / was but a prop and could not scratch an eye'**. In contrast to the short, clipped sentences of the first, this stanza consists of three longer run-on sentences, perhaps suggesting the speaker is beginning to be carried away by the flow of the drama. Although the poem uses almost no full rhyme, there are hints of assonance, consonance and half-rhyme in this stanza that echo the stylisation of filmmaking: **'wire'** and **'eye'**; **'us'**, **'fuss'** and **'trucks'**; **'engine'** and **'own'**. Much of this stanza is a description of certain scenes in the film: the **'striped victims'** is a reference to the striped clothing worn by prisoners at concentration camps. The intriguing phrase **'actors like us'** further hints at the sense of detachment and alienation the speaker feels, and his own privileged position relative to the actual victims of the Holocaust. Again, the speaker draws attention to the strangeness of the detachment between the horror of the events on screen and the comfort of the act of watching: he and his partner **'[munch] milk chocolate'** as they watch. Milk chocolate, like the accordion mentioned in stanza one, is another ironic reference to the influence of German culture on modern life.

Lines 23-33.
The final stanza recalls the hours after the couple leave the cinema, and describes the conflicted feelings the speaker and his partner experience. There is a clear sense of dejection and hopelessness in the first few lines: **'at a loss'**, they **'[say] very little'**. Again, these are subtle hints of the profound contrast between the unspeakable horror of the events they have seen dramatised on screen and the impossibility of fully understanding, mourning, or even describing them. **'[A]t a loss'** is an idiomatic phrase that describes dejection and puzzlement, but also hints at death, the idea of being 'lost for words' in the face of a bereavement. The phrase powerfully connects the feeling of confused dejection with the profundity and confusion of mourning, and is reinforced by the fact the couple **'[say] very little'**.

Further contrasts are drawn between what they have witnessed on screen and the comforts of modern life: they sit in a **'bored espresso bar'** – the implication being that the minor inconvenience of being jaded and **'bored'** in a London coffee shop is almost obscene in the face of the weight of history. They head home and **'[garage] the car'** – the term 'garage', used as a verb here, is an overtly ironic use of the word, evoking middle-class ease, privilege and comfort, while contrasting disturbingly with the image of the arrival of the train carrying prisoners in stanza two, with **'its impotent cry and its guttural trucks.'** There is a further reference to the presence of Germany in modern life, with the couple's au pair being German.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Nevertheless, the couple begin to find comfort in one another in this stanza. The speaker's wife **'[takes] off one glove'** in a gesture of intimacy. Indeed, it emerges here that the poem is actually addressed in second person, to **'[y]ou'**, the speaker's wife. The poem is therefore itself, in the face of the horrors of history, and in spite of the alienation and dejection evoked earlier in the poem, presented as a gesture of human connection and love. Finally, the couple retreat to the marital bed and make love. However, even here there are troubling visual echoes of the gas chamber, as the couple lie **'naked together, / in the dark'**.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The German philosopher Theodor Adorno famously wrote that '[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'.[5] By this, he implied that the enormity of the horrors of the Holocaust are impossible to put into art, words, or music, and questioned the ethics of attempts to recreate or reimagine them. **'A Night Out'** is a poem that ruminates on the complexity and weight of such questions. Through its reflections on the experience of watching a film about it, the poem explores the profound disjuncture between modern, peacetime experience, and those of Jews during the War. It raises the question of whether it is ethical or even possible to adequately represent the Holocaust in art and culture. Through its subtle observations, references and allusions, the poem hints at the extent to which the memory of the Holocaust lives on in post-war life. It reflects on the ways in which the banalities of everyday life, whatever their distance from the crimes of the Second World War, are nevertheless haunted by their legacy. The speaker sees in the queues outside the cinema the rows of young men and women lining up for the gas chambers; in driving his car into his modern home recalls the arrival of trains filled with prisoners. The poem has a further layer of complexity given the poet's Jewish heritage. It bespeaks a sense of emotional alienation and detachment, and the struggle of identification and mourning. The poem is written in a stylistically restrained style and tone, and in the final stanza, the speaker and his wife are **'at a loss'** to express the enormity of the subject and the depth of its emotional resonance in words. The poem is addressed in the second person as a gesture of connection between the speaker and his wife, which may appear to offer solace and hope; however, while it ends with an act of physical love, this is haunted by the memory of what has been seen on the screen.

(5) Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), p. 34.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

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

How does the speaker feel about the film he is watching?

How does the speaker contrast the experience of the concentration camp with modern life?

Is the poem presented as a consolation for the horrors of the Holocaust, or a reminder of them?

SECTION 5

(links active May 2020)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

Dannie Abse courtesy of Literature Wales.

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Link to a recording of Abse reading the poem at the University of Arizona in 1982:
voca.arizona.edu/readings-list/540/1029

Link to more recordings of Abse reading poetry in 2001:
poetryarchive.org/poet/dannie-abse

Link to street scenes in Swinging 1960s London (where and when the poem is set):
youtube.com/watch?v=5zk0eyKzp1c

Link to clip from Pasażerka (best watched muted):
youtube.com/watch?v=uR9NYWjdc7U

FURTHER READING

Archard, Cary, Dannie Abse: A Sourcebook (Bridgend: Seren, 2009).

Curtis, Tony, Dannie Abse (Writers of Wales) (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1985).

Short biography and more poems by Dannie Abse:
poetryfoundation.org/poets/dannie-abse

Dannie Abse's Obituary in The Guardian:
theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/29/dannie-abse

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CONTENTS

3 SECTION 1:
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

4 SECTION 2:
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

9 SECTION 3:
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

10 SECTION 4:
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK

11 SECTION 5:
PHOTOGRAPHS

12 SECTION 6:
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

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 Ogmore-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 Spencer, 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).

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(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).

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(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)

All links are clickable

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/mw194342/Dannie-Abse?LinkID=mp71380&role=sit&rNo=2

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

(links active August 2018)

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

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dannie_Abse

All links are clickable

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August 2018

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CREW

Duncan Bush

'"Caroline": A County Life'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

(page 586–8 of *Poetry 1900–2000*)

CREW

CONTENTS

3 SECTION 1 : BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

4 SECTION 2 : LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

8 SECTION 3 : COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

9 SECTION 4 : FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK

9 SECTION 5 : PHOTOGRAPHS

10 SECTION 6 : LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

11 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.)

Duncan Bush was born in Cardiff in 1946. A late attender of university, he studied English and European Literature at Warwick, Oxford, and Duke University (USA). As a committed European, Bush lived for much of his life in Luxembourg, but he returned to Swansea each year and remained part of the Welsh intellectual and cultural scene.

His first publication was as a promising new poet in the Wales Arts Council's *Three Young Anglo-Welsh Poets* collection in 1974, alongside Nigel Jenkins and Tony Curtis. This was followed with his own poetry collections: *Aquarium* (1983), *Salt* (1985), *Black Faces*, *Red Mouths* (1986), *Masks* (1994), *The Hook* (1997), and *Midway* (1998). Bush also wrote novels and drama, saying that he 'need[ed] to move between these genres'.[1]

Bush was also a Fellow of The Welsh Academy (*Yr Academi Gymreig*, the national society of writers in Wales) and he won many literary awards, including the Welsh Arts Council Prize for Poetry twice (for *Aquarium* and *Salt*), and the Arts Council of Wales's Book of the Year award in 1995 for *Masks*. Bush's poems have been praised for their 'dramatic touch' and their engagement with a range of contemporary social issues, including the miners' strike in 1984, and the death of Princess Diana in 1997.[2] Bush died in 2017, leaving behind a varied and respected body of work.

(1) 'Bush, Duncan', **encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/bush-duncan** [Accessed 18 May 2020].

(2) 'Bush, Duncan', **encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/bush-duncan** [Accessed 18 May 2020].

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'"Caroline": A County Life' sounds more like the title of a book than that of a poem, suggesting that this poem is going to have a narrative structure – that is, a start, a middle and an end. The title indicates that the focus will be on a woman named Caroline who likely has a rural existence, but **'County'** (rather than 'Country') brings with it particular connotations. 'The county set' is an idiomatic term for the landed gentry – the wealthy, established families who have traditionally been identified with activities such as hunting, as well as a sometimes stifling, conservative provincialism (see Web Resources below). This suggests that class, even more than a rural location, will be the focus of the poem. The quotation marks around 'Caroline' suggest that the name is a pseudonym, that the real name of the woman has been changed, perhaps to protect them in some way. Replacing the woman's real name could identify the poem as a cautionary tale to warn others; as a technique, it takes the focus away from, yet also strangely highlights, the individual at the heart of this narrative.

Form.

The poem consists of ten four-line stanzas (quatrains), which give it a regular form and solid appearance on the page, with lines ranging from six to thirteen syllables long, and most being around ten. The poem makes use of iambic pentameter, reflecting the spoken patterns of the English language and emphasising the speaker as narrator. That the poem is unrhymed, with the sentences stretching over the line ends and often across stanzas, suggests that the form and the content are not in unison: it feels as if the rigid form were incapable of controlling the story and sectioning it into neat and self-contained chapters.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1–4.

Everything the reader of the poem learns comes from the speaker, who briefly acknowledges in the first line that this is an attempt at recollection (**'I think'**). From here on the events of Caroline's life are delivered as fact and the speaker seeks to play the role of witness, rather than actor, in the tragedy. However, the **'I think'** frames and conditions the whole poem, suggesting as it does that the narrator's version of events is uncertain, perhaps unreliable, and potentially biased. It seems that Caroline has not married for love, but for wealth and prestige. The wall of her husband-to-be's country estate is what settles her decision, as it is **'dentilated'** and **'buttressed'** (like a castle wall, with holes for shooting arrows through). This wall is a physical symbol of the wealth and power the husband commands, the old money of the aristocracy that still live in castles and vast country homes. The syntax (word order) of this stanza is rather confusing and back to front, perhaps suggesting that Caroline's own thinking at this time may have been a bit disordered, and that her priorities for marriage (love against social standing) were possibly the wrong way round.

Lines 5–8.

Very often in this poem, sentences continue across stanzas. This stanza starts with the lower-case **'and'** to show that Caroline's story cannot be neatly contained by the narration. The wall stretches towards the **'land's long downslope'**, foreshadowing what this poem records: the long **'downslope'** of Caroline's life as she descends into alcoholism and then suicide. The wealth she is marrying into is physically displayed through the **'crumbling red'** bricks of the estate wall; like the wall, the family and their economic and social foundations are long-established and perhaps in decline. Caroline is described as a **'January bride'**, either in reference to the month of her wedding (which is an uncommon time of the year to get married, suggesting it might have been arranged in haste, perhaps due to a pregnancy), or perhaps more metaphorically meaning a young bride (early in the year) or a cold one (a winter month). She is **'aflush'**, which could refer to her being a 'blushing bride', still full of youth and vitality at this stage in her life. But the phrase 'flush with cash' also lurks behind this word, suggesting she is now rich thanks to her choice of husband.

Lines 9-12.

Caroline is **'aflush / with her own good looks'**, if not with her own money, but any happiness she has doesn't last for long. Within the space of two lines, the scene moves from wedding reception to honeymoon to divorce. The reception is **'swank'** (a public display intended to impress others) and the honeymoon on Mustique suggests that Caroline's husband is particularly rich and well-connected, as it is an exclusive holiday island for royals and megastars.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 13-16.
The speaker compares Caroline to **'failed students'** (l. 12) who hang around their university town, unable or unwilling to return home. This gives a certain air of immaturity to Caroline, but it also compares marriage and university as institutions, from which a person may be expelled for bad behaviour or asked to leave if certain standards are not met. Caroline has perhaps been brought up only for a marriage like this, and now that it is over, she has no concept of what else she could do with her life. Her status was affirmed by the marriage and then swiftly downgraded by divorce, and it seems the power and prestige have stayed with the husband, no doubt still behind his **'estate-wall'**, while Caroline is connected to **'bed-sits'**. Her son is unnamed, in keeping with the emotional distance portrayed between mother and child, and the **'badged blazer of flecked grey flannel'** he wears when returning **'each term'** from boarding school shows the privileged, ordered world he lives in – a world now separate from and different to Caroline's.

Lines 17-20.
The son has become a **'prig'** (a self-righteous and superior person) at only twelve. This is the language and mentality of public school children, and it conveys how the boarding school system can affect boys of his class, instilling particular values in them and discouraging displays of familial affection. Caroline's occasional sexual encounters are listed dispassionately, although they might be read as attempts to strike back at her ex-husband by sleeping with people he knows or even to whom he is related. Her choice of sexual partner may also reflect an ingrained snobbery as she tries, through her sexuality, to stay within the elite circle her husband lives in; the **'Lord Lieutenant of the county'** is presumably one of the most powerful and important men in that social group. These might be triumphs in a sense for Caroline, but they also lead to her personal disintegration when the gentry **'close ranks'** (l. 31).

Lines 21-24.
This stanza starts with a new sentence, as if announcing a specific new stage in Caroline's downfall. What follows is a gossipy list of her humiliations in the pub that supposedly signalled her descent into alcoholism. That she fell off her stool **'[t]wice'** is noted, as if each time had been much discussed and remembered by the watchful observers of her community. The pub is called **'The Flag'**, suggesting a nationalist, Conservative mindset of 'Queen and Country' attitudes. If it is the Union flag then the irony is suggested that it took Caroline's divorce (and so an end to the union of her marriage) for her to become a regular there. From this point on, it is Caroline's life that begins to **'[f]lag'**. Her voice becomes **'hectoring'** (to talk in a bullying way) and **'a bray'** (the noise a donkey makes), both of which are **'unfeminine'**, unfeminist and unflattering descriptions. There is perhaps a nod towards the vestiges of social status she maintains – she is **'eccentric'**, which is often the term used for unconventional people who have money – but the imagery of **'sour – / milk'** and **'rennet'** introduces another misogynistic aspect to the narration. Caroline has been portrayed as a failed mother, and now the metaphoric 'mother's milk' begins to curdle and spoil as she ages.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 25–28.
The milk falling through a sieve is like Caroline's life falling through her fingers. The tittle-tattle of village life is further evidenced by the two-faced barman who calls Caroline **'Margaret Rutherford'** behind her back. Rutherford was an actress famous for playing 'eccentric' older ladies, including Agatha Christie's Miss Marple. Then comes the shortest sentence in the poem: **'She started drinking in her room.'** This is now another turn in Caroline's story, as she withdraws from the community and public life almost entirely. It is not clear exactly why she stopped going to the pub, but perhaps it could have been due to financial worries, embarrassment, or the unkindness of the villagers.

Lines 29-32.
The speaker says that **'No biography can pinpoint where a life / first started to go wrong'** (ll. 28–29), and yet this poem-as-biography offers a few possibilities: Caroline marrying for money not love, her perhaps self-defeating sexual activities, her excessive drinking. In detailing what the poem cannot **'pinpoint'**, the narration knowingly outlines the demise of Caroline's happiness: **'her naïve, / excited *arrivisme*** [a negative term for the state of being newly rich] **was poisoned'** and **'the rural gentry still close ranks.'** Caroline failed to fully assimilate into the upper echelons of this county's society, and the military metaphor of **'close ranks'** likens her to an enemy force that has to be repelled. The stanza ends with the word **'reached'**, as if Caroline were reaching out but finding no end or answer.

Lines 33–36.
The alliterative **'menopause of misery'** connects Caroline's situation with her sex and age.
If the milk going sour earlier was associated with her (bitter) experience of childcare, the ending of female fertility is now linked to the end of Caroline's life. This phrase accentuates the misogynistic attitududes shown toward Caroline by the villagers and, arguably, by the speaker of the poem themself. It indicates that female reproductive capacity is linked to happiness, and Caroline has neither. A 'pathetic fallacy' is when the weather seems to mirror a character's mood in poem or a novel, and in this instance the **'mild July night'** also has **'fog'** and **'drizzle'**, suggesting that Caroline's mood is erratic, confused, and disorientated. The **'fifty-odd white pills'** might be linked to Caroline's age; she may be reflecting on the years of her life which have led to this point of crisis.

Lines 37–40.
The pills are **'gulped'** as the alcohol is **'swig[ged]'** (ll. 36–37), both active verbs suggesting an appetite that the speaker finds distasteful. Gin is a gendered drink, living up to its nickname of 'mother's ruin' in this poem. Gin is associated with both the upper and the lower classes, perhaps signalling how Caroline has traversed class boundaries over her life. The **'coroner and press and public'** are **'shocked'** by the details of Caroline's death, but exactly why is unclear. It could be due to the terrible circumstances that led to her death and her body lying undiscovered for a month, but the shock could also be a gossipy sensationalism that fixes on indecorous details like her dressing-gown.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The poem's narrator attempts to present Caroline's life in a dispassionate way – there are apparently no overt judgements about her behaviour or that of the community – but the partiality of the narrator's viewpoint can be discerned with some close reading. Perhaps the regular form is used to suggest that this is a traditional tale – one of patriarchal and class dominance over a less privileged female. In any case, Caroline being **'aflush'** and the reception being **'swank'** suggests a subtle mockery of her attempts to enter upper-class society as pretentious and superficial. However, when she is described as **'milk dribbling away to rennet'**, it suggests that she was at least as fresh and pure as milk once. The reader's assessment of Caroline will depend on what ideas they bring to the poem – whether marrying for money is forgivable or not, what level of responsibility she has for her son being so distant, and so forth. But even if the reader has an initial opposition towards her character, they would likely be moved towards a more sympathetic position by the skilful way the sad details of her death are relayed by the speaker.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

How simple or complicated is the language that the poem uses?

How does the form of the poem on the page play a part in the poem's meaning?

How reliable do you find the speaker's version of events?

What level of sympathy do you have for Caroline?

SECTION 5

(links active May 2020)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

An image of Bush can be seen on his publisher's website:
serenbooks.com/author/duncan-bush

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

News article on the ‘county set’, 2 March 1998:
independent.co.uk/news/county-set-bring-the-country-into-town-1147871.html

Duncan Bush’s Obituary in *The Telegraph*, 30 January 2018:
telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2018/01/30/duncan-bush-welsh-poet-obituary/

Profile of Bush by Robert Minhinnick:
literaturewales.org/lw-news/duncan-bush-1946-2017/

FURTHER READING

Adams, Sam. 'Weaving a Cymric Web? A Perspective on Contemporary Anglo-Welsh Poetry', *Comparative Criticism*, 19 (Literary Devolution: Writing in Scotland, Ireland, Wales and England) (1997), 117-136.

Gregson, Ian. 'Transplanted (Duncan) Bush', *Poetry Wales*, 41/4 (2005), 16-21.

Owen-Griffiths, Meriel, ' "How arbitrary one's identity": The Construction of Cultural Identity in Contemporary Welsh Poetry in English' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, The University of Western Australia, Perth, 2010). Available at: **pdfs.semanticscholar.org/7d1a/0a23977c23d8ec1b0f4b6565e5f0b635d0f3.pdf**

Minhinnick, Robert. 'Interview with Duncan Bush', *Poetry Wales* 38/2 (2002), 46-50.

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May 2020

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

CREW

Joseph P. Clancy

'Anniversary'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

(page 357–8 of *Poetry 1900–2000*)

CREW

CONTENTS

3 SECTION 1 : BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

4 SECTION 2 : LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

8 SECTION 3 : COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

9 SECTION 4 : FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK

9 SECTION 5 : PHOTOGRAPHS

10 SECTION 6 : LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

10 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.)

Joseph P. Clancy was born in New York in 1928 to working-class parents. As a 'poor boy bursting with language', he gained a Ph.D. in Literature and taught at Marymount Manhattan College for the majority of his academic career, becoming Professor of English Literature and Theatre Arts.[1] Clancy was a devout Roman Catholic and Marymount Manhattan College was originally founded as a Catholic institution.

Reading Gwyn Williams's *An Introduction to Welsh Poetry: From the Beginnings to the Sixteenth Century* (1953) sparked Clancy's lifelong passion for Welsh poetry, and he decided to learn Welsh so he could improve on the English-language translations that were available in the 1960s.[2] Two of his books from the 1960s and 1970s were combined in 2003 to produce *Medieval Welsh Poems*, which remains one of the best-regarded translations of Welsh medieval poetry into English today. Clancy also translated twentieth-century Welsh poetry into English, including the work of Saunders Lewis, Bobi Jones, and Gwyn Thomas.

Clancy also wrote his own poetry. This was in English, but heavily influenced by his knowledge of Welsh poetic forms, especially the *cywydd*. This is poetry written in lines of seven syllables, with rhyming couplets (two successive lines that rhyme with each other) that alternate between a stressed and unstressed line end. Clancy's collections of poems include *The Significance of Flesh* (1984), *Here and There: 1984-1993* (1994), and *Ordinary Time* (2000).

In 1990, Clancy retired from Marymount Manhattan College, and he and his wife moved to Aberystwyth, where they lived for more than twenty years. In recognition of his contributions to Welsh literature, particularly in making Welsh-language poetry accessible to speakers of English, Clancy was made a Fellow of the English Language Section of *Yr Academi Gymreig* (The Welsh Academy), and an Honorary Fellow of Aberystwyth University. Clancy died in 2017, just short of his eighty-ninth birthday.

(1) James W. Thomas, 'Poet Joseph Clancy Would Have Been 90', St. David's Society of The State of New York **stdavidsny.org/poet-joseph-clancy-would-have-been-90** [Accessed 12 May 2020].

(2) 'Joseph Clancy, translator of Welsh literature – obituary', *The Telegraph* (13 May 2017) **telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2017/05/13/joseph-clancy-translator-welsh-literature-obituary** [Accessed 12 May 2020].

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'Anniversary' comes from Joseph P. Clancy's 1984 poetry collection *The Significance of Flesh*. Many of the poems in this book combine the two great passions of Clancy's life: Catholicism and Welsh poetic forms. The book's title suggests the importance of the Eucharist in the Catholic tradition, when the congregation eat wafers or biscuits as a literal realisation of Christ's body, and there are poems in the collection that directly refer to Welsh-language poetry terms, such as 'A Cywydd for Madame'. **'Anniversary'** indicates a yearly celebration will be the subject of the poem, but the type of event being commemorated is left unspecified. The reader quickly comes to realise that the speaker is describing their wedding anniversary, but it is interesting to think why the poem is not called 'Wedding Anniversary'. It is always a good idea to separate the speaker of a poem from the poet themself, as poems are literary constructions and often not directly autobiographical records. However, in this poem many of the things the speaker talks about – for example, the number of children they have, the length of their marriage – reflect the details of Clancy's own life.

Form.

The form of the poem is one six-line stanza (a sixain), followed by a stanza of twenty lines and a final stanza of twenty-four lines, with each stanza ending in a full stop. The lines are all seven syllables long, showing Clancy's interest in the Welsh poetic form of the *cywydd*, but the poem does not follow every aspect of this form. There are no rhyming couplets and the lines do not always alternate between having stressed and unstressed words at their end, but the repeated use of exactly seven syllables per line shows it is a deliberate attempt to emulate a Welsh poetic form in an English-language poem. 'Anniversary' is unrhymed and the syllable-counting approach takes precedence over other features commonly found in English poetry, such as regular iambic or trochaic metre. 'Anniversary' is addressed to the speaker's wife and a poem addressed to someone is an ode. In classical Latin poetry, which Clancy also translated, odes were often divided in three parts, like this poem. It is worth noting that as a teacher also of theatre and drama, Clancy has formed the poem like a three-act play in miniature through the use of these stanzas. The short first stanza acts as a brief introduction to set the scene, the second stanza lists good and bad experiences the couple have faced, and the third stanza reveals the conclusion of the speaker's emotional journey.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1–6.
The very first word of the poem is **'Lost'**, and it is not a particularly positive term to use when thinking of a wedding anniversary. This immediately indicates that this poem is unlikely to be full of idealised romantic sentiment. The 'I' of the speaker in the present thinks about his wedding day many years earlier, but he feels so distant from the person he was then that he refers to his younger self in the third person, wondering **'What he was like, that boy'**. What is lost is ambiguous: is it the memory of the day that has faded, or does the speaker believe that this person no longer exists? The nineteen **'long summers'** since the wedding can be interpreted two ways: that the years have passed slowly; or that each year has been like one long summer, in which the coldness of winter has never had a chance to appear. Another character is introduced, **'you at the altar'**, who stands with the **'boy'**, showing this poem is written to the speaker's wife. The stanza ends with the seeming contradiction of the **'boy'** making his vows seriously, even though he was not able to understand what they would actually entail. The lines themselves are rhythmically hesitant here: the lyrical, dactylic rhythms (one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed) of the first three lines give way to a tripping, uneven metre in line 4, indicating perhaps a sense of faltering or uncertainty.

Lines 7-10.
The second stanza opens with a list of the words used in the Anglican Christian marriage vows. Without the expected prepositions of 'for' and 'in', the vows are boiled down to their bare essentials, as if these were the core memories of that day, or perhaps these lines provide a summary of the couple's life since their wedding. Looking back, the speaker feels the words spoken on that day were **'abstract'**, concepts that could not be understood at the time and which required nineteen years of marriage to become concrete. The conversion of these vows into **'body and blood'** uses the language of the transformation of bread and wine into Jesus's body in the Catholic tradition to suggest that a divine miracle has taken place, and words have turned into something living.

Lines 11-16.
It is not only the vows that have become physical; the speaker alludes to the sexual **'flesh-sharing'** between him and his wife that has led to eight children, although the speaker confesses to some form of **'neglect'** which his wife has borne (**'bearing'** in line 11 refers both to putting up with something unpleasant and being pregnant and giving birth to a child), whether that be emotional or physical. **'The easy quiet evenings / Together'** offer the first example of good aspects of the marriage, but these are quickly undercut by **'the nights you turned / Away with dreadful stillness'**, the reason for which the wife is unable or unwilling to explain to the speaker. However, he shortly asserts that his wife's **'[l]anguage'** (l. 18) is **'silence'** (l. 19), so this **'stillness'** may in fact be articulate.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 17-22.
The speaker lists some similarities and differences between himself and his wife, such as his **'harsh words'** and her **'weeping'**. Certain gender roles seem to be performed in this relationship with the man shouting, displaying anger and power, and the woman crying, signalling suffering. While the speaker appears to suggest an equivalence between the **'harsh words'** and the **'weeping'** by having them on the same line, the reader may decide that the speaker's hurtful behaviour is the cause of his wife's sorrow. It seems that perhaps they have language in common (**'Language is my world and yours'**), but the next line shows this to be an incomplete sentence that reads more negatively in full: **'Language is my world and yours / Is silence'**. However, some things that join the couple are then described in a burst of alliteration that reminds the reader this is not just prose divided into seven-syllable lines: **'Daily delights'**, **'Pride and pain, children changing'**. But this record of happy events is not long, and that poor health (**'My illnesses, your fatigue – '**) is another factor that binds the couple shows how the 'in sickness and in health' part of their vows has had to be lived through. Placing illness and fatigue next to each other again suggests parity, that **'fatigue'** is an illness, but there is also the possibility that the wife is worn out by or, less generously, bored and/or intolerant of, the speaker's **'illnesses'**. It is perhaps of significance here that her voice and approach to the 'vows' are in the main identified only through negativity, and in relation to the speaker.

Lines 13-26.
The dash at the previous line end (**'fatigue –'**) shows the speaker impatiently interrupting his own narrative, perhaps shying from or reacting to difficult emotions or truths, such as what his wife's **'fatigue'** really signifies. The exclamation mark at the end of line 23, and the rare use of an adjective in the poem – in this case **'foolish'** to describe his own efforts so far at summing up the marriage – indicate the depth of feeling behind this outburst. For the first time the poem moves into the plural first person (**'We'**) as the speaker now talks for himself and his wife together. She is given shared agency, suggested by the plural verb, **'vowed'**. This shared perspective is the turning point in the poem as it moves toward the understanding and awareness depicted in the final stanza. The speaker declares the couple who married on that day nineteen years ago are, metaphorically, dead and have been replaced by the present-day husband and wife, who have been built out of their enduring relationship: **'We *are* these years of marriage'** (emphasis added). The couple's identity has been gradually and irrevocably shaped – even created – by their shared vows, even as their shared actions and experiences over many years have endowed these vows with new meaning and reality.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 27–33.

After the brief appearance of **'We'**, the poem quickly returns to the speaker's perspective only, with 'I' used three times in two lines (ll. 27–8).The speaker confidently asserts that he now understands the meaning of their vows, while this wisdom extends to an acceptance that he will never fully understand his wife's innermost thoughts and feelings: **'I shall never / Know you wholly'**. This could well be a pun on 'holy', but it also arguably expresses an almost controlling desire for total knowledge of his wife, which she resists. The speaker acknowledges **'three separations / In nineteen years'** and it is uncertain whether he means they broke up three times or just spent three nights apart. In any case, he believes he is not a **'single self'** without her; that is, he feels he is an incomplete person when he is not with her. Perhaps the **'single self'**, rather like the **'boy'** of stanza one, is now dead; the self that remains is one formed socially and collectively, through the undertaking of a shared life.

Lines 34–47.

The next sentence is fourteen lines long, as words and thoughts pour out of the speaker. The poem stops looking backwards and describes the present situation; following the declaration that he is incomplete without his wife, it now turns out that husband and wife are apart on their wedding anniversary for the first time. This prompts the speaker into emotional and heartfelt statements, and the future is considered for the first time as he looks forward to returning to his wife the next day. Again there is an increase in the poetic nature of the language used in these more emotionally charged lines, with the near-rhyme of the line ends (**'For a late celebration, / A long-delayed conjunction'**) and the repetition of **'and'** to strengthen the links between **'bodies and hearts and minds'**. Words are shared again, suggesting an increase in communication, which had seemed lacking or diminished between the couple up until now. The anniversary celebration will be a day late, but **'long-delayed'** seems an excessive way of describing their reunion, unless the speaker is referring to a love that has been absent from their relationship for some time. He reconfirms his vows via this poem, which now takes in the last nineteen years of marriage in addition to future occurrences, to affirm he will overcome **'all surprises / And trials of love between us'**.

Lines 48–50.

The poem concludes in the frank and open tone the speaker has carried throughout, with a focus on his opinion that self-awareness is key to a successful relationship. The speaker admits he was a **'brash boy'** who has become a **'flawed man'** , but he thanks his wife for the contribution their wedding has made to his life and promises to keep loving her. However, the woman's role in the marriage is described as a 'gift' of self. 'Gift' recalls the marriage ceremony (where the woman is traditionaly 'given away' to the groom by her father, though here the woman seems to bestow the gift). It also echoes the gendered euphemism for sex, where a woman gives herself to a male recipient, extending the theme of physical intimacy running through the poem.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'Anniversary' maintains a frank and confessional tone throughout. This is understandable as it is a direct message from husband to wife, but as a published poem, the reader is drawn, sometimes uncomfortably, into the personal details of the marriage. There is only one real outburst of passion – **'Enough of this foolish list!'** – but even this should be considered in relation to the poem's form. Unlike prose, the shape of a poem is another way that meaning can be conveyed, and as an English-language version of the *cywydd* form, the discipline and control behind the syllable counting in this poem reflects the considered and deliberate reasoning of the speaker. This is not an idealised love poem with extravagant metaphors like, for instance, 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?'. The love described here is one based in reality, with all the ups and downs a long relationship encounters. Only using seven syllables per line produces a terse style in places, such as the list of the wedding vows without their prepositions, and there is a near absence of adjectives throughout; words are not wasted here and neither is the speaker's love expressed through romantic or flowery cliché. But the struggle between the restricted form and the speaker's depth of feeling is revealed by the long sentence from lines 34 to 47. What the speaker wants to say is too much for such short lines, and the run-on sentence grows from line to line, as their relationship has grown from year to year. The absence of metaphor, simile, and other poetic devices adds credibility and realism to the poem's conclusion of continuing love. Other important themes in the poem include sexuality and voice. The poem engages the traditional Christian, Catholic identification of physical sexuality with reproduction, evidenced by the eight children the woman has borne. The wife's **'stillness'** and **'silence'** at night possibly suggest the withholding of sex, which is perhaps one of the few ways she has of asserting some power in the relationship. The wife never speaks directly in the poem as everything is filtered through the speaker, but even so, he gives her little to say beyond their vows.

Her lack of voice is not untypical of love poetry written from a male perspective, but perhaps the couple achieve a certain mutual understanding by the time they '**shar[e] once more of words / And silence'**, as if they had at last learned each other's language.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

How simple or complicated is the language that the poem uses?

How does the form of the poem on the page play a part in the poem's meaning?

How reliable do you find the speaker's assessment of himself then and now?

What do you think his wife's reaction to this poem would be?

SECTION 5

(links active May 2020)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

Here is a photograph of Clancy in Wales towards the end of his life:
aber.ac.uk/en/development/alumni/obituaries/obituary-profiles/joseph-clancy

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SECTION 6
(links active May 2020)
All links are clickable

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Profile of Clancy on the Aberystwyth University website:
aber.ac.uk/en/development/alumni/obituaries/obituary-profiles/joseph-clancy

A website dedicated to Clancy's work:
profjosephpclancy.weebly.com

Obituary in *The Daily Telegraph*:
telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2017/05/13/joseph-clancy-translator-welsh-literature-obituary

SECTION 7
(links active May 2020)
All links are clickable

FURTHER READING

Thomas, M. Wynn, *Corresponding Cultures: The Two Literatures of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999).

DR ADRIAN OSBOURNE

CREW, Swansea University
May 2020

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

CREW

Gillian Clarke

‘My box’

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

(page 480-81 of *Poetry 1900-2000*)

CREW

CONTENTS

3 SECTION 1:
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

4 SECTION 2:
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

9 SECTION 3:
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

10 SECTION 4:
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK

10 SECTION 5:
PHOTOGRAPHS

11 SECTION 6:
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

Born in Cardiff in June 1937, Gillian Clarke was brought up in Cardiff and Penarth. During the Second World War she spent time in Pembrokeshire, staying at her paternal grandmother's farm, known as Fforest. The landscape of Clarke's beloved Dyfed has a significant presence in her writing and is often identified with the memory of her father, as in poems such as *The King of Britain's Daughter*. When her children were young, Clarke bought and renovated an old, ruined smallholding called Blaen Cwrt in Talgarreg, south Ceredigion, where she now lives, and which she often figures as her poetic 'milltir sgwâr' (square mile).

The publication of Clarke's collection *The Sundial* in 1978 announced her arrival as a significant new voice in the world of Welsh letters, and marked the beginning of what she calls her 'hard-working writing life'. By her own admission, she has 'worked hard for poetry, preaching the sermon of poetry, as it were':[1] editor of *The Anglo-Welsh Review* from 1975 to 1984, she co-founded the Writer's Centre, Ty Newydd, in 1990, and has always retained a connection with her readers. She worked as a tutor in Creative Writing at the University of Glamorgan (now the University of South Wales), and has visited hundreds of schools to encourage the study and composition of poetry. The National Poet of Wales from 2008-2016, she is now seen as 'arguably the most dominant and distinctive voice of Welsh women's writing in the last two decades of the twentieth century' - a progenitor whose work has influenced many others, including Sheenagh Pugh, Anne Stevenson, and Jean Earle.[2]

[1] Gillian Clarke, Interview, *Sheer Poetry*, 24 August 2005 http://www.sheerpoetry.co.uk/advanced/interviews/gillian-clarke-interview [accessed August 2018].
[2] Katie Gramich, *Twentieth Century Women's Writing in Wales: Land, Gender, Belonging* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), p. 146.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'My Box' was originally published in Gillian Clarke's poetry collection *Letting in the Rumour* (1989), dedicated to her mother and late father, John Penri Williams. It is the product of what Alice Entwhistle calls Clarke's 'productive middle career'[3] – a time in which Clarke, following the publication of *Letter from a Far Country* (1982), was seeking to 'build up a map of Wales as a whole', to which the voice of her poems assert 'a sense of belonging and allegiance'.[4] Important to this process was the act of re-imagining a 'communal family history'.[5] In this poem, the box becomes emblematic of a female history that has traditionally been marginalised, or hidden from view; it is reminiscent of the bride's trousseau, the sewing tin, or any other of the material artifacts that signal a female presence otherwise unrecorded in history books. But it also points toward a new experience, a new tradition, created through the act of poetic making.

The title, then, is deceptively simple, for it throws out a complex web of associations and affiliations. The use of the possessive, **'my'**, could be seen to enact a poetic gesture of reclamation and possession of a Welsh cultural past. Yet, as we will see, rather like Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, **'my box'** can also be seen as a declaration of female creative agency and freedom in the here and now. Promising to unveil personal experiences and secrets, the title yet conceals as much as it reveals, leaving an aura of mystery that invites the reader to fill in the gaps.

Form.

This poem is about a wooden box, created and given as a gift from a lover to the speaker. It draws on elements of the poet's autobiography, evoking a time in Gillian Clarke's life when she and her then husband bought an old condemned ruin called Blaen Cwrt in Ceredigion, which they proceeded in restoring together. Reminiscing on that time and that house as formative to the emergence of her poetic voice, Clarke recalls that 'to "work hard" meant more than one thing. It's both chopping wood, carrying water, and writing about it.'[6] The form of the poem thus reflects and embodies the act of careful construction (of a box, a house, a life, of love) depicted in its content. Its visual appearance on the page conjures a sense of solidity and self-sufficiency: lines are relatively short and even, and their arrangement in eight-line octaves gives each stanza a 'boxy' shape, as if each line were a building block, building up the poem brick by brick.

The poem shares many elements with the traditional ballad form. Characterised by strong, rhythms, repetition and rhyme, the ballad has associations with childhood, nursery rhyme, and oral folk traditions, traditionally associated with female-oriented or domestic realms of culture. The simple vocabulary of the poem accentuates its ballad- or nursery-rhyme-like feel, heightening the aura of fable or magic that pervades this poem and transforms the lived everyday into something magically other.

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[3] Alice Entwhistle, Poetry, Geography, Gender: Women Rewriting Contemporary Wales (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2-13), p. 9.
[4] Gramich, Twentieth Century Women's Writing, p. 147.
[5] Gramich, Twentieth Century Women's Writing, p. 147.
[6] Gillian Clarke, Interview by Barry Wood, Sheer Poetry, 24 August 2005 [Online].
http://www.sheerpoetry.co.uk/advanced/interviews/gillian-clarke-interview

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-4.

These opening lines appear to depict the start of a relationship, marked by the offering of a love-token in the form of a hand-made **'box ... of golden oak'**. This gift gestures to a Welsh craft tradition, which saw suitors carve lovespoons for the object of their affections. Thought to be expressive of the emotion of the carver, no two lovespoons are the same. The box, then, would seem to point to the uniqueness of the lovers' relationship, all the while connecting it with a Welsh cultural history that, given the lack of historical sources recording it, remains something of a mystery.

In spite of the intimate tone of these opening lines, the speaker's emotions remain somewhat hidden. Gillian Clarke has admitted that 'I like mystery' in poetry - hence, perhaps, her attraction to the obliqueness of the fairy tale form.[7] Here, the speaker's reticence, conveyed in a language stripped back to the bare essentials of the box's composition and construction (**'He fitted hinges and a lock / of brass and a bright key'**), hints at the myriad Welsh voices - particularly those of women - curtailed or suppressed in history. But it also invites the reader to speculate imaginatively on the missing parts of the lovers' story - why did **'He'** put so much care into the box's fabrication? Does its recipient experience joy, ambivalence, or even unhappiness on receiving it?

That the poem is focused on a material object rather than emotions also indicates Clarke's 'strong tactile and visual sense' - what scholars such as Katie Gramich see as her tendency to present history and experience in markedly spatial, material terms.[8] The sensuality and spatiality of Clarke's vision can be seen in the depiction of the shining, **'engraved'** box and the homestead with its **'sanded'** surfaces and solid stone **'wall'**, all of which invite the reader to look, to wonder and touch. Both are presented as important sites of memory and story; through her focus on the wooden box, Clarke could be seen to suggest that material objects can speak more eloquently about history (especially women's history) and the inner world of human relationships than can official history books.

The speaker's switch from the immediacy of the present tense in the first lines to the past tense in line three (**'He fitted hinges and a lock'**) indicates that she is looking back, to the time of the box's fabrication. This might account for the archaic, nostalgic tone of the opening four lines; the colour symbolism of the **'golden oak'** conjures the golden fleece and apples of Greek myth and European folklore, situating the narrative within the realm of myth.

Indeed, the speaker's box conjures the classical myth of Pandora - the woman created by the gods who opened a jar or pithos (later mistranslated as a box), thus unleashing evil and worry on the world. Yet Pandora also set in motion the human cycle of death and rebirth, and her name in Greek means 'all-giving.' Here, Pandora's box is interpreted more positively, as a receptacle for life and regeneration.

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[7] Gillian Clarke Interview, Sheer Poetry, 24 August 2005.

[8] Gramich, Twentieth Century Women's Writing, pp. 147-148.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-4 (continued).

The box, as suggested, can be seen both as a material expression of the lovers' relationship and as a symbol for a hidden female inheritance. The reference to the wood out of which it is made emphasises that the speaker's relationship with her/his lover is mediated by the environment and their shared appreciation of nature. Further, while the 'golden oak' is mirrored in the box's **'lock /of brass'** and **'bright key'**, the box's materials also establish a contrast between the natural and the man-made. This tension opens out onto other points of tension or uncertainty in the poem: is the box an act of love, given freely? Is its key the key to the speaker's heart, as suggested by the rhyming of **'me'** with **'key'**? Or does the box with its carefully-fitted lock convey a sense of protection or even imprisonment within marriage and other 'man-made' structures? The gender of the speaker is never explicitly revealed to us (although it is hinted as female), but the box's creator is explicitly gendered male. His fabrication of the box can't help but evoke a 'heteronormative' Welsh tradition in which male lovers carved gifts – and wrote poems – for female lovers who were expected to remain passive, their identities assimilated to the objects that they were given. As we will see, this poem will subtly overturn and transform this gendered tradition.

Lines 5-8.

If the first part of the stanza describes the box's materials, the second describes how it was made: **'out of winter nights'**. This presents the box (and by extension, the poem that has been made about it) as a process, a weathering of time; like love, it speaks of the human capacity to create something from nothing, the will to make new at a time when the world appears cold and dead. It also places the object in the context of the seasonality of working rural Welsh life, in which the winter was traditionally seen as a time to make and mend things that could not be attended to during the busy spring and summer months.

Like the four lines that precede them, these lines adhere to the metric pattern of the ballad stanza (four lines linked by rhyme, with four stresses on the first and third, and three stresses on the second and fourth). However, the dactylic rhythm of line 6 (one stressed syllable, followed by two unstressed) disrupts the regularity of the ballad's iambics in a way that emphasises the physical effort put into the box's fabrication over the long winter nights. And just as slowly, the box is made, so its secrets begin to be revealed over the course of the stanza: in describing the engraving on the inside of the lid, the speaker encourages us to open it – and to read on.

Clarke's poem can also be seen to reach back to a bardic Welsh tradition that figured the poet as a kind of crafts(wo)man, a figure prized for her or his technical skill. Specifically, it can be seen to reference the *cywydd gofyn*, a late medieval form in which a bard would traditionally petition his patron for a gift, in so doing describing its great beauty. As critic Katie Gramich has pointed out, many of Clarke's poems engage with the writing of fourteenth-century poet Dafydd ap Gwilym – a prolific composer of *cywyddau*. By emulating medieval Welsh forms in a new, domestic and interpersonal idiom, the poet, in Katie Gramich's words, 'fearlessly places herself in the same poetic tradition and gently provides a female vocal counterpoint' to the voices of the medieval bards.[9]

[9] Gramich, Twentieth Century Women's Writing, p. 147.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 5-8 (continued).

The repetition of '**golden'** across lines 1 and 8, and the linking of lines 2 and 4 with 8 through the rhyming of their final syllables (**'my lover's gift to me'**, **'of brass and a bright key'**, **'golden tree'**) appear to offer a pleasing sense of continuity and completion. However, this is balanced by subtle changes that occur in form and image across the first stanza. The fact that the wood of the **'oak'** is transformed into a **'golden tree'** by the end of the stanza signals that, through the act of writing, the poet is putting down roots. The traditional ABCB rhyme scheme of the first four lines is disrupted in lines 5-8 (**'planed'** and **'tree'** do not rhyme), defying reader expectations and opening out the poem to the possibility of different phonic connections. Again, this accentuates the idea that the poem – like its lovers – draws on the ancient past to create its own tradition, in fitting with 'a new society, a new Wales.'[10]

Lines 9-16.

These lines are more explicitly about writing, and, crucially, being able to feel at home in writing. They also explore the theme of mutuality, and consider poetry's role in processes of reclamation and conservation. The traditional gender roles of the craftsman as artist and his lover as passive recipient are challenged here when we learn that the speaker, too, is an artist, a fabricator of words. For rather than keeping linen or jewellery or any of the traditional paraphernalia of femininity in her box, she keeps **'twelve black books'** of her own writing. These make allusion, perhaps, to the *Lyfr Du Caerfyrddin* (the Black Book of Carmarthen), one of the earliest surviving manuscripts written solely in Welsh. Speaking Welsh was discouraged in Clarke's childhood home by her mother, who like many Welsh speakers of her generation associated English with social betterment. The box of black books, placed under lock and key, might be seen to convey Clarke's childhood sense of being locked out of the Welsh-language tradition.

For Clarke, feeling estranged from the Welsh language was bound up in a sense of estrangement from the world of poetry that she often links to her gender identity. She recalls how, at university, 'I was taken aside by my tutor and told: 'Forget your poetry now. This is an academic institution and you must concentrate on your studies ... Where, in my education, were the women poets? Where were the Welsh poets? I became secretive about my writing after that.'[11]

In this poem, the '**black books'** become emblematic of a new, female literary authority. Inscribed with the details of the speaker's daily life, they emphasise a sense of writing as something immersed in shared effort and domestic, everyday life (hence the shift from the third person singular, in stanza one, to the first person plural in this stanza). Repetition abounds: line 11, **'how we have sanded, oiled and planed'** echoes line 6; the **'apples and words and days'** harvested by the lovers in line 15 echo the reference to **'winter nights'** in the first stanza; the reappearance of the **'golden tree'** in line 16 signals its status as a kind of refrain, typical of the ballad form. Like ancient Welsh poems in the oral tradition, Clarke's use of circularity and repetition function as a kind of memory work, shoring up precious aspects of the past against forgetfulness.

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[10] Emyr Humphreys, The Taliesin Tradition (2000), quoted in Alice Entwhistle's chapter on Gillian Clarke in Poetry, Geography, Gender, p. 117.

[11] Gillian Clarke Interview, Sheer Poetry, 24 August 2005.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The **'wild heartsease'** and **'well'** allude to a sense of healing and flow: heartsease is a wild flower used in traditional botanic herbalism to purify the blood and aid respiration.

At the same time, the disruption of the ballad's iambic rhythm becomes even more pronounced here: the first line is trochaic (a 'trochee' is a metric pattern or 'foot' made up of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable), and the dactylic rhythms at the beginning of lines 12, 14 and 15 (a 'dactyl' being composed of one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed) emphasise a sense of growth and overflowing abundance. In fact, you could argue that the poem derives its gently subversive power from the practice of incremental repetition: phrases and images recur but always with subtle differences – with the result that the same old words take on fresh new meanings, almost imperceptibly.

Lines 17-20.

The accentual rhythm of **'On an open shelf'** places emphasis on **'open'**. The speaker's assurance that the key is not hidden away, but is instead **'in the lock'** highlights the accessibility of the box, and by implication, the openness and inclusivity of the new poetic tradition it has come to represent. This stanza has to do with poetic legacy – with what it handed down – as implied by the speaker's statement that **'I leave it there for you to read, /or them, when we are dead'**. Although it is projected as a kind of heirloom, the tradition represented by the box is not so much about ownership: rather, it is freely offered to each and every reader of the poem, who are invited to discover and use it for themselves.

Lines 21-4.

The final four lines of the poem gather together images that have recurred throughout the poem. In a similar moment of synthesis, the speaker reaches a realization of **'how everything is slowly made, / how slowly things made me'**. In this way, s/he offers a reflection on the different ways that the space that is Wales/Welsh tradition has shaped the figure of the poet, even as s/he slowly shapes and recreates it through writing. The ancient words that make up the poem's refrain, **'books and a golden tree'** are no longer tinted with nostalgia: rather, they now evoke a sense of growth and, in the roots of the tree, interconnection. This sense of the interconnectedness of books and trees, people and things, inside and outside, is accentuated by the complex, interlocking sound correspondences in these lines, which make innovative use of rhyme, assonance, and alliteration (**box/lock, made/me, me/tree, box/books**).

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The presence of the lyric 'I' in this poem signals Clarke's skillful adaptation of the traditionally communal ballad form to the more personal, reflective idiom of the lyric. The interrelation of these forms highlights the play between interiority and exteriority, secrecy and sharedness, which characterises this text. For Clarke, a poem is 'about telling the truth. It is personal, but never just my experience.'[12] The story of the box is particular to the speaker, but it is also, the poem seems to suggest, common in some ways to many people. Furthermore, the lovers' painstaking, joyful reclamation of the house from nature becomes a metaphor for the speaker's reclamation of a 'home' in poetic tradition. The box with its engraved **'golden tree'** becomes a more fitting image for love and partnership, perhaps, than the gold wedding ring. For it speaks, not of closure, but of sharedness and connection. Clarke herself has suggested that she prizes sequences 'where one poem will glance at another and connect … so that things will layer into each other and connect, sing to each other – I love that! So instead of the poem being boxed in, it opens out.'[13]

'My Box' also glances at other poems: not only those of the medieval Welsh-language tradition, but also the lyrical ballads of Wordsworth, a strong influence on Clarke in her early career. Yet, rather than being boxed in by this wealth of cultural knowledge, the speaker, like a new Pandora, discovers in her box materials with which to build a new creative life.

[12] Gillian Clarke Interview, *Sheer Poetry*, 24 August 2005.
[13] Gillian Clarke Interview, *Sheer Poetry*, 24 August 2005.

SECTION 4

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

How do you think the speaker feels about the box? Why?

What do you think are the most important images in this poem?

What is the role of the natural world in this poem? Are the species of birds and flowers that are mentioned linked to a particular place? What might be the relevance of this?

How simple or complicated is the language that the poem uses? Why might this be?

SECTION 5

(links active August 2018)

All links clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

https://i2.wp.com/www.gillianclarke.co.uk/gc2017/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Windswept.jpg?resise=768%2C858

Clarke's photograph, featured on her official website, is marked by the directness of her gaze. The camera angle, facing slightly upwards, signals her status as a respected figurehead for Welsh poetry, while the background of autumnal trees is apt given the importance of the natural world in her writing.

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SECTION 6

(links active August 2018)

All links clickable

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

This webpage includes an extended critical perspective, biography, bibliography (up to 2012) and a list of awards:

https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/gillian-clarke

Gillian Clarke's own website has a useful page of recommended resources for teachers:

http://www.gillianclarke.co.uk/gc2017/resources/

Gillian Clarke's reading of 'Swans', from her 2012 Collection Ice, gives an insight into her use of pacing and rhythm:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cuKxqlJZg00

An interview with Gillian Clarke at Glyndwr University, filmed 23.11.11. Clarke offers insights into her view of the role of the National Poet of Wales; her attitude to Wales and Welsh culture; her smallholding in Ceredigion, and attitude to life in the country and the city. It finishes with a reading of her poem 'Welsh':

https://vimeo.com/32633745

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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.

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Tony Curtis

‘Portrait of the Painter Hans Theo Richter and his Wife Gisela in Dresden, 1933’

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

(page 600–1 of *Poetry 1900–2000*)

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CONTENTS

3 SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

4 SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

12 SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

14 SECTION 4 :
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK

14 SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS

15 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.)

Tony Curtis was born in Carmarthen in 1946, and was educated at Swansea University and Goddard College, Vermont. He has produced several collections of poetry, including *War Voices* (1995), *The Arches* (1998), *Heaven's Gate* (2001) and *Crossing Over* (2007). In recent years, Seren published the volume of Curtis's poetry *From the Fortunate Isles: Poems New and Selected* (2016), and in 2017 Cinnamon Press published a book of his short stories, *Some Kind of Immortality*. He currently divides his time between his home of Barry in Wales and Lydstep in Pembrokeshire.

Curtis is also a respected editor and critic who has published many books on Welsh literature and art, including *How Poets Work* (1996), and *Wales at War: Essays in Literature and Art* (2007). We can see his talents as a critic applied in full force in his poetry, which shows an interest in historical perspectives, close observational skills, and a measured openness to the complexity of human experience. The sense of restraint that often characterises his poetic voice nonetheless leaves room for a tender, emotional connection with the subject matter.

Several themes reappear in Curtis's poetry: his family and friends, particularly his dead father; the wars of the twentieth century, and a strong affection for his native west Wales. While for some his poems seem to strike a melancholy tone, pondering on loss and memory, others have insisted that they are 'more celebratory than elegiac'.[1] His works consider the restorative, healing capacity of poetry, its ability to retrieve beauty from horror and destruction and to imagine 'some kind of immortality'. Although Curtis is influenced by a range of traditions, especially Western visual art, his sense of immersion in the culture of Welsh writing in English is also evident: as a child in the 1940s he briefly rubbed shoulders with Dylan Thomas in Carmarthen, and he was taught as an undergraduate at Swansea University by the poet Vernon Watkins. Curtis has emphasised the influence of Thomas on his writing, along with many other Welsh writers and artists such as Glyn Jones, Dannie Abse,[3] John Ormond and Ceri Richards.

(1) 'Tony Curtis', in Jeremy Noel-Tod and Ian Hamilton (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Modern Poetry in English*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 126.

(2) Tony Curtis, *Some Kind of Immortality* (Blaenau Ffestiniog: Cinnamon Press, 2017).

(3) Tony Curtis wrote *Dannie Abse (Writer of Wales)* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1985).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.
'Portrait of the Painter Hans Theo Richter and his Wife Gisela in Dresden, 1933' was first published in *Taken for Pearls* (Seren, 1993). The poem borrows its title from that of a painting by German artist Otto Dix (1891–1969). Following the tradition of ekphrasis practiced by poets from the Classical Greeks to John Keats, W.H Auden and R. S. Thomas, **'Portrait of the Painter'** is devoted to a detailed description of, and reflection on, Dix's artwork, which depicts the German painter Hans Theo Richter seated next to his wife, Gisela Hergesell, who embraces her husband in a peaceful gesture of affection. As the poem itself will make clear, the pinpointing enacted by the painting's title in terms of time and space (Dresden, 1933) takes on a deep poignancy in light of what we now know of historical events; Hans Theo Richter and Gisela Hergesell lived in Dresden during the 1930s, where Richter practiced his art, but Gisela was killed in the devastating Allied bombing of the city on 13 February 1945, and much of Richter's work was also destroyed.

Curtis's poem appears to contemplate, perhaps even to consecrate, the beautiful, but in retrospect terribly fragile, **'moment of love'** (l. 1) and creativity enjoyed by Hans Theo and Gisela before the rise of Fascism and war. Through its subtle play of imagery and allusion, it also engages a wider historical context to explore the aftermath of war and its impact on art and human relationships.

'Portrait of the Painter' also uses Dix's art as an occasion to meditate on the nature of perception and the often fraught relations between history and art, war and love. The use of the word **'Portrait'** in the title self-consciously calls attention to the poet's own act of portrait-making, and in turn, the act of looking itself. In fact, the poem as a whole poses the question: how do we look at art, and can we trust what we see? The sharp contrast that is established between the speaker's golden, rosy view of the painting and the harsh realities of the times in which it was made highlights their tendency to read into the work the image of the beauty and togetherness they so desperately want to find in the past. Indeed, we are asked to consider whether, in a time after Dresden, Auschwitz and Hiroshima, we are able to see this loving scene in the same way as did its contemporary viewers. Do the events of history 'betray' the lovely dream of the portrait? (It is fitting to consider that Otto Dix was himself stripped of his honours by the Nazis, who also seized many of his works from public collections, considering them 'degenerate'.) Or does its image of **'perfect'** (l. 1) love give the lie to the harsh realities of twentieth-century history? Curtis's poem asks us to consider the role of art and the artist in relation to politics and history, and the humanising power of love in a brutalised world.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Form.
'Portrait of the Painter Hans Theo Richter and his Wife Gisela in Dresden, 1933' is an ekphrastic poem that follows in a long tradition of poems describing visual artworks. Despite its engagement with the story of the couple depicted in the portrait, the poem's central thrust is primarily visual, rather than narrative-based. The speaker constructs their picture of the painting through a series of impressions or visual observations, which are slowly built up and added to stanza by stanza. Each of its seven stanzas is carefully end-stopped, and acts as its own little vignette, standing alone just as the painting stands alone in its frame on the wall. The regularity of the poem's form, comprised as it is of three-line tercets, each with lines of similar length, mirrors the balance and composure that the speaker infers in the portrait of Hans Theo and Gisela. The patterning of imagery and sound across the poem further contributes to a sense of connection and harmony.

Rather than offering an orderly, logical description of the portrait, however, the visual impressions presented by Curtis remain dream-like, with the same words and images appearing and disappearing across different stanzas, twisted and transformed by their subtly different contexts: this is poetry as vision, history as hallucination. What we have at the end is a layered, composite view of the painting, which in turn allows for a deepened understanding of its history and significance.

Lines 1–3.
The poem begins with a declaration: **'This is the perfect moment of love – '** (l. 1). The speaker seems to be in no doubt that the portrait not only represents, but actually *is*, an embodiment of love – a fleeting **'moment'** in time, preserved in its entirety by the artist's brush. However, in light of what we know about the terrible events that were to befall Dresden in 1945 – the Allied bombing raids over 13–15 February in which an estimated 22,700–25,000 people were killed, including Gisela Hergesell – the romantic confidence of the opening line is already undercut, adding an faint edge of irony to the speaker's celebration of **'perfect…love'**. The careful depiction of the sitters' poses – **'Her arm around his neck, / Holding a rose'** (ll. 2–3) appears matter-of-fact, but actually reveals the speaker's own desire for perfect balance and harmony.

The construction **'Her arm…his neck'** emphasises a sense of equilibrium and reciprocity between Hans Theo and Gisela. The tenderness of their affection is suggested by her gentle touch on his neck – a sensitive, vulnerable part of the body. Although it is Gisela who is **'Holding a rose'** in Dix's portrait, Curtis's use of line breaks and omission of personal pronouns in line 3 creates a sense of merging, as if both partners are holding the flower together. The pointed reference to the rose takes the scene into the mystic idealism that we associate with religious and medieval poetry; we might think of the Bible's Song of Songs, or the image of the love garden in *Le Roman de la Rose*. Art, love, spirituality: all are woven together here into a **'perfect'** whole.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Otto Dix's 'veristic' style – a realistic, 'warts-and-all' form of painting – reveals the imperfections in its subject;[4] in his portrait, Hans Theo and Gisela are portrayed as mature adults, still young but more in the autumn than the spring of their youth; their expressions are solemn, enigmatic, satisfied yet also faintly sad. These subtleties are edited out in the first stanza by the idealising speaker, although these 'shades' will be added in later. The act of **'Holding** a rose' suggests security: the couple are holding on to each other, and keeping their love for each other safe. Yet the rose is also a traditional symbol for ephemeral beauty. Similarly, given the portrait's interwar date (1933), the dash at the end of the first line projects the sense of being on the edge or brink of something, suggesting that this **'perfect moment'** is soon to disappear in the face of the as yet unknown. In fact, even as the speaker appears to insist on the portrait as revealing a self-enclosed, untouchable moment, the final image with which it ends, that of Gisela **'Holding a rose'**, is oddly inconclusive, leaving much unsaid.

Lines 4–6.

Gisela becomes the focus of the speaker's attention in this stanza – a move that goes against the grain of the title, which places **'The Painter Hans Theo Richter'** in prime position. That the speaker dedicates this stanza to describing **'Her wisps of yellow hair'** (l. 4) and **'Her face [as] the moon to his earth'** (l. 6) is suggestive of the poem's developing concern with femininity and gender relations in love and art. The language here is natural (**'light'** (l. 5), **'gold'** (l. 5), **'moon'** (l. 6) and traditionally Romantic, drawing on well-worn poetic epithets for describing female beauty. The stanza's elemental pairings (light/dark, sun/moon, masculinity/femininity) evoke the symbolic patterning of light and dark that cadences the poem as a whole, and point to a spiritual and philosophical concern with 'yin and yang' – the balance between forces which seem opposed but are in fact interconnected.

Yet in spite of the beauty and vitality of Gisela, the reference to **'wisps of yellow hair'** are suggestive of insubstantiality. Furthermore, while the observation that she is **'moon to his earth'** might seem romantic, it also indicates the gender inequality inherent in the couple's positioning in Dix's painting. As Curtis's speaker indicates, Gisela, dressed in a worldly, elegant manner in black and gazing lovingly at her husband, is shown to revolve around the image of her husband the artist, who sits in the immediate foreground, thoughtful and saintlike in his gleaming white smock. While Gisela is perceived here in her stereotypical role as artist's muse, this view of the artist's wife will be subtly challenged later on in the poem.

(4) John Pollini, *From Republic to Empire: Rhetoric, Religion, and Power in the Visual Culture of Ancient Rome* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), p. 39.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 7–9.
Here the speaker takes a step back from the dreamlike **'moment'** of the portrait to consider the material conditions that produced it – namely, the light glowing on the wall of Otto Dix's studio. This light is transformed by the painter into the **'warm wheat glow'** (l. 8) emanated by the couple in the portrait, suggesting the human warmth and domestic intimacy that they signal to the troubled artist in that particular moment. The sudden shift to the world beyond the canvas here is reminiscent of *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), which similarly calls self-conscious attention to the perspective of the artist and what is left out of the traditional portrait.

Wheat is a traditional symbol of fertility, and **'warm wheat glow'** has an archaic ring to it, as if recalling an earlier, rural life when such nourishing human relations were possible. Ample use is made here of sonic effects, such as repetition (**'glows…glow'** (ll. 7–8)), alliteration (**'wall…warm…wheat'** (ll. 7–8)), and assonance (**'glow…loving'** (ll. 8–9)), and there is an element of Terza Rima to be found, where the final words of the first and last lines of the stanza (**'glows…couple'** (ll. 7–9)) display half-rhyme with the middle line of the previous stanza (**'gold'** (l. 5)). The overall effect is one of abundance and healthy growth. **'[G]low'** could even allude to the Welsh *glaw* (rain), balancing the warming fireside **'glow'** of the couple in a vision that contrasts and connects nature and art, inside and outside. The repeated 'ow' sound, when read aloud, imitates the pursed-lips movement of a kiss. We might again note that Dix's art went on to be deemed 'against nature' by the Nazis, who confiscated some of his works, and many other modernist artists were targeted. This stanza puts up a passionate defence of the humanity of his portrait, weaving a protective halo around the characters at its centre.

Lines 10–12.
From the golden tones of the previous three stanzas, here we notice a turn to something wholly darker and more disturbing. We are reminded that, rather than depicting the youthful beginnings of love, what we are seeing is an aftermath – the aftermath of the First World War and the trauma of the trenches. Otto Dix served as a German soldier on the Western Front, and he was forever changed and embittered by the horrors he saw there. The **'dark etchings'** (l. 10) and **'blown faces'** (l. 11), while making reference to Dix's painterly techniques (which included etching, aquatint and drawing in thin tempura), recall his obsessive depictions, as in his 1924 series *Der Krieg* (The War), of 'the aftermath of battle: dead, dying and shell-shocked soldiers, bombed-out landscapes, and graves.'[5] This connection is borne out by the reference to **'Bapaume'** (l. 11): the name and location of one of the last, major offensives of the First World War, which took place from 21 August 1918 to 3 September 1918. (*Der Krieg* also includes an aquatint etching entitled 'Wounded Man, Autumn 1916, Bapaume'.)

(5) New York Museum of Modern Art, 'German Expressionism',
moma.org/s/ge/collection_ge/objbyppib/objbyppib_ppib-12_sov_page-37.html [accessed 18 May 2020]

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

While the contrast established between the beautiful faces of the lovers and those of Dix's anguished soldiers, with their skull-like gas masks and eyes grotesquely large and round in horror, is shocking, it is also telling; it is as if war and violence are looming up to break up and distort the redeeming humanity that Hans's and Gisela's portrait represents. The adjectival **'blown'**, suggesting as it does 'blown up', offers a deforming, unsettling echo of the luminous **'glow'** in stanza 3. Language is weighed and chosen carefully here to show how history reveals itself in the **'etchings'** and tones that can only be discerned by close observation.

The speaker's continued use of the present tense (**'This is…This is'**) collapses past and present within the **'moment'** of observation; the reiterative nature of this stanza is also perhaps suggestive of disbelief, as if the speaker is signalling their struggle to reconcile the divergent realities of love and war. The **'sickly greens'** (l. 12) and **'fallen browns'** (l. 12) conjure deadened vegetation, mud and khaki uniforms; hinting at the moral sickness or 'degeneration' of which Otto's art was accused, Curtis repurposes the term to describe war's attack on both natural and human flourishing.

Lines 13–15.

The fifth stanza turns away from war to consider the loving pose of Hans Theo and Gisela, which is conjured through a series of natural and Romantic images. Gisela is described as **'a tree, her neck a swan's curved to him'** (l. 13), while her husband's hands **'enclose her left hand / Like folded wings.'** (ll. 14–15) The avian imagery conjures the faithful partnering for life of birds such as turtledoves; the partners' two hands are portrayed as two wings on the same beautiful bird. The idea of the artist or poet as a bird is invoked here (and applied as much to Hans Theo as to his wife Gisela), a trope that signals a freedom of voice and spirit. The biblical narrative of Adam and Eve, as presented in Genesis, is reversed by Curtis: here we find angelic purity **'after'** (l. 11), not before, the **'fall'** (l. 12) from grace – although the hints of sorrow remain. The images of the swan's neck and the woman as a tree have mythological associations. In the classical myth of Leda and the Swan, the god Zeus appears in the form of a Swan and rapes Leda, an Aetolian princess (a 1923 poem by W.B. Yeats explores the lasting trauma of the rape for the female members of Leda's family). In the *Metamorphoses* of Roman poet Ovid, female characters such as Myrrha and Daphne are changed into trees either to escape male desire or due to their own suffering in love. We can note, too, that Hans Theo's grasp **'enclose[s] her left hand'** in a gesture that could also be read as suggestive of possessiveness. All this begs the unsettling question: what is the nature of the power relations between the genders here? What signs of control or possession are revealed or concealed by their apparently tender gestures?

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 16–18.

The listing technique used here (**'This is before the fire-storm, / Before the black wind, / The city turned to broken teeth'**, ll. 16–18) conveys an accumulative sense of the almost unbearable horrors of war. Again, the imagery skilfully picks up on, and distorts, the previous images of love depicted in terms of nature and human faces. In the poem's first direct reference to the bombing of Dresden, the **'fire-storm'** and **'black wind'** reference a tendency among writers of the 1940s to express the spectacle and devastation of aerial warfare in terms of natural phenomena; see for example Lynette Roberts's poem about the bombing of south-west Wales, 'Lamentation' (1944), in which 'a storm of sorrow drowned the way.'[6] To a contemporary reader, these images have a distinctly ecological resonance, too: we might think of the black ash-filled wind of the Australian bushfires of early 2020. Notably, while **'fire-storm'** might conjure the Nazi use of the term 'Sturmabteilung' (*Storm Detachment*) to describe its paramilitary wing, the bombing of Dresden was carried out by British and American forces – another unsettling ambiguity in this poem that contrasts good and evil.

Lines 19–21.

The speaker returns again to seek solace and healing consolation in the beautiful details of the portrait. Although the line **'It is she who holds the rose to him'** (l. 19) appears to closely echo the opening lines of the poem, there is a subtle difference; Gisela is here presented as the more active party, as suggested by the emphatic **'It is she'**; the 'gift' of the rose reverses traditional gender relations, at least in literature (where often men, in their gendered guise of courtly lover, are imagined as giving gifts of flowers to their female beloved). It is suggestive of an equality between genders, as well as a different form of relation between the lovers to the one summarised by an economy of possession (we might note Gisela's representation by Dix as a modern woman dressed in an androgynous style, and the fact that Gisela was a craftswoman in her own right, from which she earned her livelihood). The **'surgeon's smock'** (l. 21) worn by Hans Theo to paint is an endearingly eccentric detail, that alludes to the healing, reconstructive qualities of art (we might think back to the **'broken teeth'** of the previous stanza). Read in another way, however, the **'surgeon's smock'** could refer again to the godlike pretensions of the artist and the 'bloody' nature of portrait painting, with its tendencies to get 'under the skin' of its subject.

(6) Lynette Roberts, 'Lamentation' (1944), in *Collected Poems*, ed. Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), pp. 8–9 (p. 9).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 22–24.
The reiteration of **'This is the perfect moment'** (l. 22) turns the phrase into a kind of refrain, an affirmation to which the speaker returns. Yet this repetition, in light of what we now know, also has an unsettling, uncanny quality, and signals that the speaker is critically distancing themself from this **'perfect moment'** that cannot last. Dix's painting and its female subject, Gisela, are conflated and *become* love itself: **'the perfect moment'**. Gisela is a **'painted'** (l. 23) woman: woman as idea, woman made eternal, and eternally beautiful by art. Yet she is also **'painted'**, wearing makeup, signalling a kind of artificiality, for all the poem's allusions to naturalness. 'Painted woman' is also an idiomatic term for a prostitute – perhaps a nod toward Otto Dix's more grotesque portrayals of human social behaviour – evoking the antifeminist idea of art as like a prostitute: that is, seductive yet unstable.[7] A jarring separation between art and life opens up here, which is experienced as the pain of loss (**'She will not survive'** (l. 24)), the almost clinical brevity of the statement highlighting the human tragedy to which it refers.

Lines 25–27.
The imagery used to imagine Gisela's death skilfully flows from the previous images of nature, war and love found in the previous stanzas. As in a nightmare, familiar images are altered and made frightening: the **'wisps of yellow hair'** described in the second stanza become **'hair that flames'** (l. 25); where once she was like a tree with a white neck like a swan, now **'Her long arms blacken like winter boughs'** (l. 27), as if reaching out for help that doesn't arrive. By turning bodily horror into an artistic image, the allusion to the woman as a kind of dying nature goddess distances us slightly from the scene, containing its emotion. **'[W]inter boughs'** signal death and sterility, but also the hope of regrowth through art and memory.

Lines 28–30.
The statement **'This is the harvest of their love'** (l. 28) is bitter: the speaker is seemingly ruing that all that love and living and art should have come to this. But the stanza that includes it also offers a kind of resolution, achieved not so much through rational thought as by the mental development and change enacted by the poetic images. The **'perfect moment'** of love is not the traditional spring, nor is it an autumn (**'harvest'**); rather, it is a **'summer in the soul'** (l. 29), a moment of flourishing poised just before the point of decline; love is inevitably shaded, and given meaning and intensity, by loss. Art is not 'degenerate', as the Nazis would claim of Dix's paintings, but rather, like love, something that is inherently generative and germinating – strong enough, in fact, to combat even those powerful forces of destruction that annihilate the loving **'moment'**. Art and love, the speaker concludes, are a collaborative, communal effort: **'The moment they have made together'** (l. 30).

(7) French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821—1867) in his early journals wrote 'What is art? Prostitution.' See **bbc.com/culture/article/20150910-courtesans-and-street-walkers-prostitutes-in-art** [Accessed 4 June 2020].

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 31–33.
We move in this final stanza from sight and vision to sound, here associated with the material elements of daily life. Coming as they do – in the poem's chronology, if not in historical time – after the Dresden bombing raid, they also have a ghostly feel to them, signalling emptiness and loss as much as they do continuation: **'The baker's boy calling, a neighbour's wireless / Playing marches and then a speech.'** (ll. 32–3). The painter himself is personalised through the reference to his first name, suggesting a kind of familiarity on the part of the speaker: **'From Otto's window the sounds of the day'** (l. 31). We are returned to the moment when, traumatised by his experiences in the First World War, Otto Dix picks up his paintbrush and begins to paint his beautiful portrait. Emotion is controlled to the very end of this poem: the final three lines have an odd bathos to them. The sense afforded by the speaker of the continuation of life in complete indifference to the private tragedy of Hans Theo and Gisela is reminiscent of W.H. Auden's famous 'Musée des Beaux Arts' (1939), especially its opening lines: 'About suffering they were never wrong, / The Old Masters: how well they understood /… how it takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along.'[8]

(8) *The Collected Poetry of W.H. Auden* (New York: Random House, 1945), p. 3.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The poem's representational framework is complex, featuring as it does a late twentieth-century speaker depicting an early twentieth-century artist's portrait of another artist and his partner. But its language is lucid and precise, evoking, perhaps, the clarity of observation traditionally prized by the art critic.

Both Hans Theo Richter and Otto Dix embraced a mode called 'New Objectivity', a style of painting that, described by one of its founders as 'new realism bearing a socialist flavour', favoured close observation, everyday settings and human imperfections,[9] exhibiting the concern with art's relation to people's ordinary social lives that we also see in many Welsh writers, especially those of the 1930s and 1940s. While Dix's Portrait draws on some of the tenets of religious Renaissance art, Curtis's poem also has a spiritual and Romantic tone, evidenced by its frequent allusions to mythology and nature. A distinctly 'poetic', elemental diction could seem clichéd, but is deployed here in such a thoughtful way that it appears newly revealing and meaningful.

The flexibility afforded by the poet's use of free verse allows us to become gradually aware of the observing perspective of the speaker; dashes, full stops, and the use of asides (e.g. **'This is after Bapaume'** (l. 11) convey the rhythms of a mind thinking, pausing, trying to make connections as the speaker grasps after the portrait's deeper meanings.

The painter and his subjects – Hans Theo Richter and Gisela Hergesell – are endowed with a universal significance, while also remaining embodied individuals that, like Otto's room at the end of the poem, remain elusive. The artful simplicity of Curtis's style, together with its use of pathos and understatement, make us think of the writing of soldier-poet Alun Lewis, who is similarly concerned with human love and the fragility of beauty in war.[10] The poem's constant weaving together of rose and fire imagery also gestures to the redemptive spiritual vision of T.S Eliot in his own wartime poem, 'Little Gidding' (1942). Like 'Little Gidding', Curtis's poem rejects linear chronologies for a more circular, hopeful sense of time, suggesting, like Eliot, that 'The end is where we start from.'[11] Otto Dix's portrait of the artist and his wife, this poem seems to suggest, shows the power of art to rescue beauty and meaning from the ravages of time and twentieth-century history.

(9) New Objectivity, Tate Art Terms, **tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/n/new-objectivity** [Accessed 20 May 20]

(10) We find echoes of Lewis's 'Raider's Dawn', which describes the aftermath of a bombing raid, where 'Blue necklace left / On a charred chair / Tells that Beauty / Was startled there.' Alun Lewis, 'Raider's Dawn', in *Poetry 1900-2000*, ed. Meic Stephens (Cardigan: Parthian, 2007), p. 175.

(11) T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 197.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'Portrait of the Painter' is also a poem about looking – and how we look at art. Dix's portrait of that name engages a long tradition in Western art of portraying notable male figures with their wives (we might think of Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini portrait (1434), or Thomas Gainsborough's 'Mr and Mrs Andrews' (c. 1750). While these traditional portraits – and to some extent, Dix's painting too – are designed to emphasise the status and identity of the male sitter over and above that of his wife, in Curtis's poem, it is Gisela's appearance, gestures and tragic story that are brought to the fore. There may well be a sense in which the speaker (and possibly the poet himself) is more comfortable with contemplating a female figure in the traditional aesthetic way, turning her into a symbol of lost beauty and love. But, arguing for the shared, collaborative nature of love and art between different genders, Curtis perhaps also subtly comments on how war and Fascism act to control and destroy the traditionally 'feminine' domains of human experience (love, sensitivity, human connection) that allow art to flourish.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

How many images relating to nature can you find? Pick an interesting one.
What is the significance of this nature image?

How many images relating to war can you find? Pick an interesting one.
What is the significance of this war image?

How does the poem portray Hans Theo Richter and his wife Gisela?
How is their relationship presented by the speaker?

How does the speaker feel about the painting they are viewing?
How do we know?

SECTION 5
(links active May 2020)
All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

Tony Curtis
Photograph © Literature Wales.

Otto Dix, 'Portrait of the Painter Hans Theo Richter and His Wife Gisela in Dresden, 1933'
wikiart.org/en/otto-dix/portrait-of-the-painter-hans-theo-richter-and-his-wife-gisela

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Biography, Books, Reviews
tonycurtispoet.com

Seren Books: Review and Video of Curtis Reading his poem 'Megan's First Snow'
serenbooks.com/productdisplay/crossing-over

Carol Rumens's Review of Tony Curtis's Poem 'Coram's Cloth', from his Anthology *Tokens for the Foundlings* (2012), 30 April 2012
theguardian.com/books/2012/apr/30/poem-week-corams-cloth-tony-curtis

Poetry Book Society, Review of *From the Fortunate Isles: New and Selected Poems* by Tony Curtis (2016)
poetrybooks.co.uk/products/from-the-fortunate-isles-new-selected-by-tony-curtis

Seren Books Blog, Guest Post: Tony Curtis Marks International Conscientious Objectors Day, May 15 2020
https://serenbooks.wordpress.com/2020/05/15/guest-post-tony-curtis-marks-international-conscientious-objectors-day/

FURTHER READING

Relevant criticism by Tony Curtis:

How Poets Work (Bridgend: Seren, 1996).

Wales at War: Essays in Literature and Art (Bridgend: Seren, 2007).

Welsh Painters Talking (Bridgend: Seren, 1997).

Relevant criticism on Tony Curtis:

Barry, Peter, 'Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 31/2 (2002), pp. 155-165.

Peach, Linden. *Pacifism, Peace, and Modern Welsh Writing* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2019).

Wallace, Diana, 'Inventing Welsh Writing in English', in Geraint Evans and Helen Fulton (eds), *The Cambridge History of Welsh Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 557-575.

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CREW

Jean Earle

'Jugged Hare'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

(pages 126-7 of *Poetry 1900-2000*)

CREW

CONTENTS

3 SECTION 1:
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

4 SECTION 2:
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

10 SECTION 3:
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

11 SECTION 4:
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK

11 SECTION 5:
PHOTOGRAPHS

12 SECTION 6:
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

Jean Earle was born in Bristol in 1909 but grew up in the Rhondda where her father worked as an architect and surveyor, and spent most of her life in Wales, after marrying an engineer whose work took him all over the country. 'I'm English but *I feel Welsh*', she told an interviewer in 1996 (1).

Although she wrote from childhood, like a surprising number of women of her generation, Earle came late to publication; she brought out her first collection in her early seventies to swift acclaim. For all her popularity with readers, her work has never enjoyed the attention which its spry and meditative style invites and rewards. This seems strange, for a writer who drew openly on an intimate and affectionate knowledge of the culture and traditions of the country she was happy to call home. Place, and the resources of memory (like a faith she described as buried below a deep layer of doubt) was more important to her than gender: again like many of her female peers, she was suspicious of political positions and 'isms' (2). Her poems prefer to seek out traces of the revelatory, epiphanic or enchanted in the ordinary; the kinds of mundane events and routines she gently opens to transforming scrutiny are more often than not located explicitly in the quietly rural, frequently gendered, Wales which represents the places she grew up in.

Earle's first collection of poems *(A Trial of Strength)* appeared in 1980. It was succeeded by four more: *The Intent Look* (1984), *Visiting Light* (1987), *The Sun in the West* (1995) and *The Bed of Memory* (2001). A *Selected Poems* was published in 1990. Jean Earle died in 2002. Her work has been included in a number of influential anthologies, including *Twentieth Century Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (ed. Dannie Abse, Seren) and *Welsh Women's Poetry* 1460-2001 (ed. Katie Gramich, Honno).

(1) 'Memory is like Company', New Welsh Review, 33 (1996), 42.
(2) 'Memory', 44.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.
'Jugged Hare' appears among a group of 'new poems' included in Earle's *Selected Poems*, published in 1990. The title refers to a traditional way of cooking game or fish, in which the whole animal, cut into large pieces, is stewed slowly in a sealed pot. Conventionally the dish is thickened with the hare's own blood, and served with port, a sweet fortified (red) wine. It is worth knowing that a number of ancient cultures ascribed the hare sacred or magical powers, and that – as well as being widely constructed in folklore as a trickster, sometimes benign, sometimes not – in classical sources the animal is associated (along with rabbits) with love and its deities.

'Jugged Hare' offers a touchingly detailed portrait of a mother remembered in the act of preparing the dish of the poem's title for her husband. The poem uses the memories it recovers to examine as well as honour the creative purpose and determination of the woman it places centre stage, while obliquely protesting at the way her domestic circumstances define and seem to confine her. It is tempting to imagine that the voice of the poem belongs to Jean Earle herself, and that the woman under scrutiny is the poet's own mother, but there is no direct or explicit evidence of this link. It does not seem particularly helpful to tie any of the characters to an actual family context or story.

For the most part, the poem's language is direct and straightforward; it uses the vocabulary of the child who reports the events it recounts. Towards its end, as the speaker's perspective shifts to that of the adult recovering a childhood memory, the word use grows more sophisticated.

Form.
'Jugged Hare' is lightly, rather than elaborately, formal. It falls roughly into two halves. Each half comprises three loosely built stanzas (or parts), each one 'end-stopped', or brought to a distinct and definite close by a full stop. The two halves are separated from each other by the single isolated line which marks the poem's centre.

The first three stanzas, which introduce the scene, the woman, and the process she is absorbed in, are all six lines long. The last three stanzas, in which the poem's reflection on that peaceful domestic scene grows broader and implicitly darker, are seven, nine and five lines long respectively. In this variance, the poem's form helps to trouble both the apparently calm scene it starts by describing, and the relationship that the meal seems intended to celebrate.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1–4.

The opening stanza immerses us in the main scene of the poem: the work which goes into preparing the meal. A **'jugged'** stew needs freshly caught game, partly because the cooking method makes use of the animal's own blood. Hanging the catch upside down means that the blood collects in the chest cavity, from which it can be (relatively) easily drained and collected. The poem's first lines emphasise the woman's emotional connection with the hare, partly by telling us about her grief, and partly by giving an animal which is venerated in rural tradition a tender-seeming nickname: **'She mourned the long-ears / Hung in the pantry'**. The effect of the nickname is powerful, not only because it seems so affectionate; it also deftly conjures the visual image of the hare's ears hanging (long) beneath the rest of its corpse.
The animal's beauty, both heightened and made pitiable in death, is discreetly emphasised by the details of its **'shot fur'**: **'shot'** recalls the lustrous depth of colour and texture of 'shot silk' (fabric as costly as it is beautiful), as well as hinting at the manner of the hare's death. These ideas re-echo in the aurally-linked 'soft' embedded in **'Softly dishevelled'**, and the woman's instinctively caring response: **'She smoothed that'**. The line break which interrupts this response with the contrastingly ugly activity of **'gutting'** (which likewise interrupts the smoothing – or stroking – of the hare's fur) silently suggests that this cook must harden herself against her natural compassion in order to carry out her brutal task.

Lines 4–6.

The stanza's closing two and a half lines hint at a wider context for the meal, and the woman's reasons for embarking on it. The observation that her work **'Sicken[s]'** confirms that the task is physically as well as emotionally difficult. We begin to realize that we are witnessing – perhaps being asked to bear witness to – someone of particular strength of character and resilience; in the space of barely half a line we learn that her motives for putting herself through a task she seems to find repugnant are driven by feeling for her husband: **'she would rather / Sicken herself, than cheat my father…'**.

In the context of marriage, the word **'cheat'** carries perhaps unusual force. Certainly it suggests the extent of the love or sense of responsibility which wife must feel for husband, given the 'sicken[ing]' work involved in making **'his jugged hare'**. Equally we might note the use of the possessive **'his'** in the stanza's final line. Does it honour **'his'** work, in (perhaps) having caught the hare? In doing so, does it hope somehow to distance – partly exonerate, or excuse – the woman from any involvement in (or desire for) the hare's death? Does the emphasis on **'his'** stew even (still more subtly) suggest an undue degree of possessiveness in the head of this household?

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 7-12.
The second stanza returns to the personality of the cook at work in her kitchen. The parallel between the hare, and the speaker's **'tender'**, **'freakish'** mother is explicitly if briefly drawn, only to be rapidly undermined by the **'resolute'** streak we have already seen in action. To be 'resolute' is to be possessed by and fixed (or resolved) on achieving a particular purpose. The poem obliquely contrasts this aspect of the woman it studies with the 'mad March hare' of rural folklore.

The hare's reputed madness refers to the courting behaviour, occurring in spring, of the normally shy brown hare: the female forces a suitor to defend and prove himself by standing on her hind legs and 'boxing' him with her forepaws. A leaping courtship pursuit or 'dance' usually then ensues, in which the stamina of the hopeful male is put to the test.

It doesn't seem coincidental that the poet decides here to return our attention to the woman's determination, and capacity to override her compassion for the hare: **'She peeled it to its tail. / Oh, fortitude!'** Simultaneously, and by way of explanation, the text intertwines ideas of romance and courtship into the sometimes gruesome practical detail of the cooking process, as when the cook's sparkling **'rings'** are conjured against the (presumably bloodied) **'newspaper wipes'**.

The combining of blood and expensive port in the stew's famously rich **'gravy'** finds other suggestive echoes. The word **'Sacrificial'** helps point us towards both pagan and Christian religious practice: the Christian Eucharistic feast pays tribute to Christ's sacrificing of his body and blood in the symbolic blessing and sharing of bread and wine). We might be struck just as forcibly by the sense that the feast marks some kind of self-sacrifice, of her nurturing instincts if nothing else, on the part of the speaker's mother. If there is a kind of ritualism about the preparations, the poem's readers might be being gently reminded of the rural superstitions in which hares are linked with witches and witchcraft. It was believed that hares could turn into witches, and vice versa, as and when escape or disguise seemed necessary.

Lines 13-18.
A poem which carefully avoids seeming judgemental perhaps comes closest to criticism in this third stanza, just ahead of the pivotal single line at the text's centre. The speaker chooses this moment to suggest the influence exerted by husband and marriage over the mother, and by extension how far (as the speaker reveals) the mother is prepared to stage-manage its rhythms and patterns **'On high events ... / Dramas, conciliations –'**.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 13 - 18 (continued).

'Conciliation', or making up, acknowledges that this household suffers and survives the same tensions as any other. On the other hand, these lines offer an interestingly equivocal amplification, or filling out, of the previous stanza's (brief) invitation to think of the mother as victim of her husband's desires. Picking up now, perhaps, on the folkloric belief in the shape-shifting hare and its trickster-like powers of magic and enchantment, the poem's protagonist is pictured as enjoying her power to control aspects of the family's domestic life, even if this is limited: **'as a child plays house'**.
It is now, perhaps ironically, that her own watching child (a girl, the poem will eventually hint) is caught up in the work: **'She sent me out / To bury the skin'**, while the heart is **'Tossed ... to the cat.'** The carelessness of this last gesture, from a figure we know is far from heartless, perhaps haunts the remainder of the poem.

Line 19.

The five short and simple words of this single sentence, arranged on its own separate line, break open the three stanzas which precede it. At its most obvious, the metaphor of a river in flood **('spate')**, threatening to burst its banks, ascribes to the cook/mother, swept up in her own creative energies, a near-ungovernable power: her strength of purpose seems to make her unstoppable, forceful to the point of destructive violence, indomitable, and (equivocally) the more admirable in and for that.

Lines 20-26.

The several dialogues which the poem has now set up (between domesticity/food and romance/love; creativity/care and destruction/violence; and between pagan ritual and Christian self-sacrifice) are brought powerfully together in its second half. In the concluding three stanzas, our focus turns from the not always palatable preparation of the stew to the theatre **'framing'** its consumption, **'dished up on willow'**. **'Willow'** seems likely to refer to the mass-produced blue and white crockery which became popular in the 19th century (*chinoiserie* was a kind of art deriving from ancient China), the images of which are supposed to represent a tragic story of romantic love.

Once again the poem brings the speaker's memory alive with sensual detail touched, like the lingering **'Fragrance of wine and herbs'**, with religious feeling. The sanctifying smell of the stew not only blesses the kitchen; the hare is depicted as having been **'braised by God'** Himself. Less obvious, but perhaps more significant, is the return to the idea of the wife and mother as artist or enchantress, using her creativity in ways which extend well beyond the culinary. Here she is made to seem more painter than witch, skilled in the use of the 'frame' to orchestrate what her remembering child (drily) terms the **'One-off scenarios'** which help her control the dynamics of her marriage.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 27–30.
The penultimate and longest of the poem's seven stanzas is also perhaps its most enigmatic. The stanza begins by considering the immediate effects of the **'feast'** on the man – and behind him the partnership – for whom the stew was made with such determination and **'fortitude'**. The stew is explicitly credited with having ignited a physical, even sexual, response:
After the feast, my father was a lover
Deeply enhanced.
I heard them go to bed,
Kissing – still inside her picture.

These simply-phrased lines don't bother with elaborate language or flowery metaphors, and seem only the more forceful for that. Above all, they dramatise the extent of the mother's power – vested in perhaps more than her stew-making – over her husband. This impression is deepened, if also ironised, by the suggestion of the speaker (sounding at this point more adult than child) that it is in fulfilment of her **'picture'** that the mother has made the stew, in order to ignite the passion in her husband which serves to transform him, enhancingly, into spellbound **'lover'**. In this way the wife's stage-managing of the lovemaking which follows the feast, seems somehow less tender catalyst of consummation, than triumphant *denouement* of all that has preceded it.
At this point the poem hovers between accusation and tribute: confirmed as deliberate architect of her **'picture'**, and to some extent the circumstances of her own life, do we want to think of wife and mother as a self-hardened, self-interested, cunning sorceress, or as a hopelessly romantic loving artist? The speaker stops short of another question: how far the scene her mother constructs for herself and her husband **'Kissing ... inside her picture'** differs from the presumably less passionate realities of life outside that picture, and how she might feel about that. Whose, we might be tempted to ask, are the desires which the meal is intended to assuage: her own, perhaps, as much as her husband's?

Lines 31–38.
That the woman desires something beyond the love-making which the stew prompts, is suggested by the misery she suppresses until her husband has fallen asleep, **'Stunned with tribute.'** The child's sensitive but also naïve assumption, that what she hears are sobs of guilt for the hare and its fate, hints at her youth. If the hare's sacrifice has haunted the 'drama' throughout, the poem's conclusion confirms that another witness might question the extent to which the meal and its ending fulfilled the cook's first purposes. Was it made to pay sincere **'tribute'** to her husband and the mutual loving relationship in which their conjoined lives and the domestic wellbeing of the household are anchored? To revive and renew that same relationship, perhaps worn and tired by use and familiarity?

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 31-38 (continued).
More seriously still, the weeping might be read as an expression of desperation, sparked by the re-intrusion of reality: **'Outside her frame'** awaits ordinary, anti-climactic, life. Perhaps the largest, and least answerable, question which the poem asks, then, is about the mood in which she weeps. With sadness at the brevity of the interlude, the passion, which the stew helped bring about; the loss of the romance, as excitement and pleasure gives way to sleep and love itself recedes? Was the meal, in fact (and to her now adult child, understandably) a means of assuaging her own physical desires?

The last line of this penultimate stanza runs on, across the stanza break, helping to emphasise the gap between the suppressed weeping in the darkened house at the day's end, and the possible causes on which the final stanza reflects. The speaker's sense that **'marital skills'** might be hateful, even despicable, and **'lady-hands'** duplicitous (delivering both brutality and love) licenses us, in turn, to wonder whether she weeps in disappointed or frustrated knowledge of the cost of the **'One-off scenarios'** she arranges? Or perhaps for the predicament of her idealistic imaginative caring self, which must be steeled, repugnantly, to **'flense a hare / Because she wooed a man'**? The speaker's use of the verb 'to flense', a now archaic term for stripping or skinning (usually an animal's meat from its fat or skin), lends the mother a rare or special skilfulness which makes her seem almost exotic, and her powers perhaps stronger and more mysterious, for all that she seems to regret them.

Lines 39-40.
The poem's stark final lines help underpin its overriding ambivalence. Here, finally, a plainly adult speaker recognises both the depth of the gesture which the stew and its preparation makes to the waiting family, and the unacknowledged demands that meal, relationship and domestic life must have made on the imaginative, creative, sensitive being - artist/author/enchantress - at the heart of the household. It is to the complexities, emotional as well as practical, of the situation that the speaker, poem and poet together pay tribute.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

Jean Earle's portrait of a mother's devoted and selfless (if not necessarily entirely loving) nurturing ('sustenance') of her marriage in the early twentieth century offers a sympathetic but also unvarnished portrait recovered with as much scepticism as respect. The poem implicitly takes a less forgiving view of the gendered power relations which govern the life, habits and expectations of the woman it studies, and that are likewise woven through the domestic world it seems to suggest she has created.

Straightforwardly, the poem might be read as an elegy for the hare. It also seems a sympathetic testament to the hidden complexities of the marriage partnership the speaker conjures, with affection but also insight, from memory. In some ways the implicitly critical strand which runs through the poem, emerging most powerfully in those economical final lines, helps to hold the text and its equivocal implications together. We cannot know the precise cause of the weeping which the speaker remembers overhearing, still less what that unhappiness might suggest about the mother's feelings about her situation. However, the poem also leaves us in little doubt of the speaker's suspicion that to some extent, if forgivably, the woman can be held at least partly responsible for the position in which she is pictured, for all the softness and sensitivity we glimpse in her. If she gives her labour, time and energy freely, she seems implicitly aware that there might be other ways to personal fulfilment, and – being, we know, **'resolute'** – to have decided against them. Indeed, by the end of the poem, we are invited to think of this **'freakish'**, admirable woman as being as helplessly trapped in (her blood metaphorically drained by) the deadening necessities of her domestic existence, as the hare was trapped by its hunter.

Both animal and mother, then, can be understood as victims – in their different ways – of the man whose desires are framed in and called into question by the poem. The resonances deepen when they are extended to encompass the cooking method which is (superficially) the poem's chief concern, and the parallels between the methods of preparing and cooking the hare itself, and the life of the speaker's mother. The poem implicitly suggests that the woman is herself **'jugged'** (cooked slowly in her own blood in a sealed cooking pot) by the constraints of her life, circumstances and her devotion to her husband and family. And it is in this process, in the same way that the hare is transformed into a feast of magical (aphrodisiacal) powers, that she somehow maintains her own creative powers of control and enchantment, and sustains herself, her marriage and the family through them.

FOUR QUESTIONS PUPILS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

How does the poem ask us to view the woman it places centre stage? Critically? Or with sympathy? Why might it matter?

The reading above suggests that the poem draws a parallel between the **‘tender’**, **‘freakish’** woman, and the hare she is preparing to stew. What evidence can you find to support this claim?

Why do you think the speaker (and/or poet) might want to draw such a parallel? What difference might it make, or not, to your own sense of the poem’s implications?

Jean Earle often wrote in ‘free verse’. What do you understand this term to mean and how does it seem to describe the form of the text discussed here? Why and how might ‘free verse’ seem suited to the ideas and implications of ‘Jugged Hare’?

SECTION 5

(links active August 2018)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

A photograph of the front cover illustration of Earle’s Selected Poems, published in 1990.

• **https://www.serenbooks.com/productdisplay/jean-earle-selected-poems**

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

There are very few scholarly materials available on Jean Earle and her work. This poem is briefly discussed in *A History of Twentieth Century British Women's Poetry*, by Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle (p. 247). Interviews with Earle appeared in *Poetry Wales* in 1981 (No. 17 issue 1, with Sandra Anstey) and in *New Welsh Review* in 1996 (No. 33, with Katie Gramich).

A more recent tribute to Earle appears here:

http://greghill.website/JeanEarle/JeanEarleHorizon.html

All links are clickable

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University of South Wales
August, 2018

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CREW

Stuart Evans

‘Blue Carnations’

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

(page 419 of *Poetry 1900–2000*)

CREW

CONTENTS

3 SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

4 SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

7 SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

8 SECTION 4 :
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK

8 SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS

9 SECTION 6 :
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

10 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.)

Stuart Evans was born in Swansea in 1934 and was the son of a local schoolmaster. He studied English Literature at Oxford University, winning the Newdigate Prize in 1955 for his poem 'Elegy for the Death of a Clown'. Evans served in the Royal Navy and married an officer from the women's section before becoming a lecturer at Brunel College of Advanced Technology in London. He then moved to the BBC where he produced radio programmes for use in school education.

Evans was more well-known in the twentieth century for his prose fiction than for his poetry, particularly the *Windmill Hill* sequence of five novels (1978–87), that dealt with 'the themes of Britain's contemporary social, moral and spiritual decline, intellectual shoddiness and political disillusion'. His writing was compared by one reviewer to that of the London-Welsh poet David Jones (1895–1974) for the way contemporary settings were linked to the historical past, and it was said that his best prose was informed by his 'eclectic, poetic imagination'.[1]

He published two collections of poetry in his lifetime: *Imaginary Gardens with Real Toads* in 1972, and *The Function of the Fool* in 1977. Evans died in 1994.

(1) *The Times*, 29 December 1994, p. 19.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'Blue Carnations' do not exist in nature, so the poem's title suggests something unreal or unobtainable. However, blue flowers and carnations are common enough separately, so blue carnations are not on the fantastical level of, for instance, unicorn horns. This is an important distinction because the blue carnations of the title are a romantic quest object in the poem, and a sense of proportion keeps the speaker's professions of love, which he links to the image of the blue carnations, believable.

It is always a good idea to separate the speaker of a poem from the poet themself, as poems are literary constructions and often not directly autobiographical records. However, in this poem the focus on the metaphorical map-reading skills of a long-term couple may reflect the experiences of the real-life Evanses, including perhaps their military service. The gender of the speaker and the person they are addressing is never directly stated in the poem and the reader is free to make their own decisions about this. In light of the poem's autobiographical dimensions and tongue-in-cheek usage of gendered markers to describe the couple, the reader may well decide that the speaker is male and the addressee female.

Form.

The poem consists of three five-line stanzas (quintains), with lines ranging in length from ten to fifteen syllables. These stanzas give the poem a regular form and solid appearance on the page, indicating the deliberate literary decisions behind the poem's construction and reflecting the longstanding relationship at the poem's core, but rigid uniformity is softened somewhat by the varying line lengths. The poem is unrhymed, with a conversational tone that makes the poem's rhythm generally iambic, but this is not meticulously enforced throughout.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1–5.
The poem begins in what seems to be the middle of a conversation; it is certainly a response to something said by the ***'you'*** of the second line. It appears that the **'you'** has just said that she has a sense of direction and the speaker is good with maps, and the speaker wishes to entirely disagree and switch these attributes around: **'Oh no, it is *I* who have the sense of direction, / And it is *you* who are good with maps.'** A contrast is established between the speaker and the person they are talking to, and the good-natured disagreement is followed by the speaker's assessment of the other person's character as **'patient'** and **'generous'**. The speaker downplays his own qualities by claiming that the other person is kinder, while he is the kind of person who makes **'loud assertions'**. While acting to foreground the (perhaps usually more reserved) addressee, the use of comparisons also shows how their individual identities are formed in relation to the other.

The differences between **'maps'** and a **'sense of direction'** symbolises the differences between the two characters in the poem: a sense of direction is often thought to be an innate ability, but is hard to actually measure. Maps, on the other hand, are representations of the world that can show physical data (altitude, etc) or sociological data (areas of wealth, population density, etc). While maps are selective and simplify the information they transmit, they are also linked to power – for instance, Ordnance Survey began as a military division – and knowledge: that is, they actually create the knowledge about space and society that they claim to represent.

Men have stereotypically been seen as more adept at reading maps, and women allocated a more intuitive 'sense' of space and place – assumptions that have been robustly challenged by sociologists, feminists and scientists in recent years. This poem arguably invokes so as to muddy and, ultimately, challenge the gendered categorisations that have traditionally associated men with maps, knowledge and power. Calling attention to the limitations of his own 'masculine' performance, the speaker points to an alternative mode of knowledge and understanding, represented by his partner's **'maps'**.

The extent to which gender roles are truly being challenged in this stanza is however unclear: the speaker's effusive praise for his partner's patience would hardly seem to depart from the idealising tendencies of earlier male poets. However, by insisting that **'it is *I* who have the sense of direction'** and **'*you* who are good with maps'**, he certainly reverses – and unsettles – the tired portrayal of women as followers and men as leaders and readers of maps. Gender and spatial politics are enclosed in a moment of levity and humour, suggested by the partner's **'laugh'**; it is ironic that, even while complementing his partner, the speaker is stepping in to contradict her – a moment reminiscent of the row over directions that seems to befall almost all couples at some point.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 6-10.
The speaker thinks more deeply about maps and having a sense of direction in connection with the relationship. The reader may have assumed that the **'you'** was good at *reading* maps, but the speaker now reveals that she creates the maps. Maps provide an overview of the bigger picture and enable planning ahead, but it should also be noted that these maps are informally constructed (**'sketched'**) rather than accurately measured and professionally printed. This indicates a certain level of improvisation, which may in turn suggest that relationships have to respond in real time to changing terrain and unfamiliar locations. The combination of the speaker's sense of direction and the maps tell him only one thing, which is **'how to find you'**. A map with only one destination sounds like a treasure map, in which case the **'you'** is the treasure it leads to, but this is a very faint allusion as there is little other language of treasure-hunting in the poem. The partner is seemingly identified not only as an end-point or goal, but as a mode of orientation enabling the speaker's flourishing and development in the world.

The speaker portrays himself as a follower and admiringly talks of his partner's capabilities: **'it is always you / Who really know where we are and how not to be lost.'** A key word here is **'really'**, suggesting that the speaker often claims he knows where he is, when he doesn't. The stanza ends with the strange construction **'how not to be lost'**. It seems that rather than knowing exactly where you are, the most you can hope for is not being lost, which is a rather negative outcome from having a map. Perhaps this is the best you can expect from **'sketched'** maps, but the idea emphasises the wider tensions between communication and misconception, certainty and confusion, that inform the poem as a whole.

Lines 11-15.
The speaker's **'blustering'** (talking loudly and without effect) seems a performance intended to amuse his partner, whom he also **'teas[es]'** when she **'pretend[s] to be careless'**. There is a double meaning to **'careless'**, suggesting either that the **'you'** is carefree and relaxed, perhaps when sketching the map, or that she doesn't care for the speaker. In either case, pretence and performance seem to be important factors for both characters and their relationship in this poem. The partner's ability to create maps that **'make sense and meaning of our world'** means the speaker doesn't have to work out why the world is as it is – rather than creating his own path in life, he only has to follow what is laid out before him. The use of both **'sense and meaning'** suggests they signify different things: 'sense' relates to navigating a physical environment through our five senses and/or through common sense, while 'meaning' suggests a more cerebral order of interpretation. The partner's **'maps'** combine these two poles and the speaker shares in the process, as suggested by the plural **'our world'**. The speaker says that he is willing to continue accompanying his partner on this exploration until they find **'Blue carnations'**. This is to say that he will happily spend his whole life with her, looking for a **'token of loving you'** that doesn't really exist, because it is the journey together that matters, not what might be found at the destination.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'Blue Carnations' presents a good-natured but personal situation, in a conversational style. The first-person narrative gives us access to the speaker's thoughts and, in addressing his partner in the second-person (**'you'**), the speaker also addresses us as readers of the poem, pulling us into the middle of the discussion. The regular form shows the poem's deliberate construction, but the variable line lengths, in which the poet prioritises what he wants each line to say, stop the poem from rigidly adhering to an unchanging pattern. This can be linked to the confusion in the poem regarding who has which particular qualities, and its representation of the efforts needed to communicate clearly. The key images, despite the poem's title, are maps, and the significance attached to the making of maps and their interpretation drives the emotional heart of the narrative. The speaker credits himself initially with having a good **'sense of direction'**. This suggests inborn, intuitive skills. He asserts his partner is **'good with maps'**, and this suggests acquired, logical and mental abilities. That his partner **'sketche[s]'** the maps shows the active role she plays in ordering and navigating the world they both inhabit, although it also suggests that these maps are informal and perhaps not always accurate. Maps are, of course, always re-presentations and abstractions. They straddle the boundaries between art and empiricism. Historically, maps are connected with spiritual quests (e.g. the Mappa Mundi), conquest and control (the name Ordnance Survey belies the military origin of the agency created to map Scotland at the time of the Jacobite rebellions in 1745), but they can also be creative, imaginative, inventive (e.g. maps of fictional worlds).

Another important word in this poem is 'and' – it starts many of the lines and clauses within the poem. Its recurrence conveys the speaker adding and adding to his case, rather than this being a poem of 'buts' and argument: **'And it is *you*'**, **'And it occurs to me'**, **'and it is always you'**, **'And I am happy'**, and so on. 'And' is a conjunction, and its frequency in this poem enforces the positive joining, in the speaker's mind at least, of the two different characters. The speaker does have a certain sense of direction as he knows which way the poem is going, and each 'and' adds another layer to his profession of love for his partner.

In the end, the blue carnations, rather than being the object of the quest, are entirely unimportant in themselves. They are grouped with **'any other token of loving you'** that the speaker may come across while following his partner's maps. The speaker understands these non-existent flowers to be unreal and insignificant images when compared to actual love. Perhaps we might say that love is presented here as an alternative, ultimately more resonant journey and cartography than the one laid out by power and officialdom.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

How simple or complicated is the language that the poem uses?

How does the form of the poem on the page play a part in the poem's meaning?

How reliable do you find the speaker's assessment of himself and his partner?

What are maps for and why are maps so important in the poem?

SECTION 5

(links active May 2020)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

The blue carnation, a flower that does not exist in nature:
www.floraqueen.com/blog/what-are-blue-carnations

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Transcription of Evans's obituary in *The Times*, 29 December 1994:
archive.org/stream/NewsUK1994UKEnglish/Dec%2029%201994%2C%20 The%20Times%2C%20%2365150%2C%20UK%20%28en%29_djvu.txt

Evans's page at Parthian Press website:
parthianbooks.com/products/the-caves-of-alienation

On cartography, power and the problems of representation, see this article entitled 'How Maps Lie':
surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1245&context=sumagazine

Guardian articles on (and images from) the British Library's Exhibition 'Magnificent Maps: Power, Propaganda And Art':

theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2010/jan/26/british-library-map

theguardian.com/culture/picture/2010/may/10/british-library-fra-mauro-map

Maps of Welsh writing in English at:
literaryatlas.wales

FURTHER READING

Evans, Stuart, *The Function of the Fool* (London: Hutchinson, 1977).

Evans, Stuart, *The Caves of Alienation* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2009).

https://www.literarygeographies.net/index.php/LitGeogs
(Journal articles on the theme of 'Literary Geographies'.)

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CREW

Alun Lewis

'Goodbye'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

(Page 179 in *Poetry 1900–2000*)

CREW

CONTENTS

3 SECTION 1:
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

4 SECTION 2:
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

9 SECTION 3:
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

10 SECTION 4:
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK

10 SECTION 5:
PHOTOGRAPHS

11 SECTION 6:
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

Alun Lewis was born on 1 July 1915 in the small coal-mining village of Cwmaman, in Glamorgan. His parents, T.J. (Tom) and Gwladys Williams, were both English teachers. Although, as M. Wynn Thomas points out, he was 'educated out of the working-class mining community of his native Cynon valley', Lewis's consciousness was shaped by the plight of the South Wales mining communities during the 1930s (1). During his university years studying history at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, he was committed to the ideals of building prosperity through socialism and preserving world peace (2). A dreamy young man, his early career was marked by a sense of inner conflict and uncertainty, but he never relinquished his vocation as a poet. After taking up a temporary teaching post at Lewis Boys' School, Pengam, in 1940, Lewis enlisted with the Royal Engineers in London, and was sent to a Training Centre in Longmoore, Hampshire. He found life in the ranks cramped and frustrating, and baulked against the entrenched hierarchies of the English class system. His poetry, collected in *Raider's Dawn* (1942) and *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets* (1945), offers an eloquent reflection on what it means to be a writer in a society at war (3). Lewis met and fell in love with schoolteacher Gweno Ellis in 1939, and they married during a weekend of leave in 1941. Posted to India as a 2nd Lieutenant with the South Wales Borderers in October 1942, he was struck by the heat, the topography and the deprivation of the people around him. In the summer of 1943, while on leave in the Nilgiri hills, he met Freda Aykroyd, a writer and wife of a nutritional scientist, and their intense love affair inspired several of his poems.

Lewis died in Arakan, Burma (now Myanmar) on 5 March 1944. The cause of death was given as an accidental gunshot wound from his own weapon, and was possibly suicide. Welsh literature in English had lost one of its most singular, sensitive voices, when 'a bullet stopped his song' (4).

(A longer biography is available in the *Library of Wales* anthology Poetry *1900-2000*, ed. Meic Stephens, pp. 173-4.)

(1) M. Wynn Thomas, '*Review of Alun Lewis, Collected Poems*, edited by Cary Archard', *The Guardian*, 9 February 2008 https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/feb/09/featuresreviews.guardianreview24 [accessed August 2018].
(2) Greg Hill 'Alun Lewis - the war, darkness and the search for poetic truth',*Critical Survey* 2, 2/2 (1990), 216-222 (p. 216).
(3) Hill, 'Alun Lewis', p. 218.
(4) Alun Lewis, 'All Day it Has Rained', in *Poetry 1900-2000*, p. 176.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.
'**Goodbye**' is among those poems collected in *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets*, published posthumously, in 1945. *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets* is subtitled *Poems in Transit*, and in 'Goodbye', the idea of transit – of passing away or passing through – encapsulates the lovers' sense of betweenness and of being out of place. The poem evokes a moment in which, as a narrator of one of Lewis's short stories puts it, '[n]one of us are ourselves now…neither what we were, nor what we will be' (5). The poem's title implies that its speaker is already moving off – but to where? His destination remains a mystery. Death, transition, 'uncertain progression', then, are some of the central concerns captured by the title. But the word 'Goodbye' also has an informal simplicity that belies the seriousness of the poem's subject-matter. It establishes the colloquial, interpersonal tone that suffuses this poem like the glow from a lamp. The speaker's restrained informality and use of understatement hints at an experience and a depth of feeling that remains inarticulable.

Form.
The visual form of this poem on the page, like the title, is relatively simple. Short, regularly arranged stanzas reflect an attempt on the part of the writer to clarify and come to terms with a newly complex world. The poem's arrangement in quatrains and regular ABCB rhyme scheme aligns it with the ballad form. The ballad has its origins in folk culture, and is traditionally used for storytelling. This poem, too, tells a story of sorts. Rather like Lewis's short stories, it speaks of his aim to '[make] live ordinary life' through a form that is 'simple, lucid, broad' (6).

Yet this poem does not use the conventional four-stress, three-stress metre of the ballad. Rather, its rhythms follow the modulations and patterns of the speaking voice – a technique borrowed from poets such as Edward Thomas. This conveys a feeling of naturalness and intimacy – qualities that, in Lewis's view, were threatened by the mechanised, dehumanised conditions of modern warfare.

(5) Alun Lewis, *Collected Stories*, ed. Cary Archard (Bridgend: Seren, 1991), p. 169. From the story 'They Came', the last story in *The Last Inspection* (1942; the book appeared in 1943).
(6) Alun Lewis, quoted in Pikoulis, *Alun Lewis*, p. 80.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1 - 4.

These opening lines immediately engage the reader with the speaking voice. The tone established is interpersonal (the speaker is addressing another person), gentle, melancholy. The semicolon punctuating line two is a common feature of this poem, introducing a pause or silence that says at least as much as speech. Here, the lovers' relationship comes to symbolise Lewis's cherished values of 'love and beauty, the deeper and lasting things', offering a silent protest against a social and political system that leaves neither time nor space for tenderness (7). The tension between permanence and transience that underlies the poem is introduced here. '**And go, as lovers go, for ever**' suggests that love is doomed because lovers are destined eventually to part; but it also implies that lovers (or the idea of lovers, at least) are by nature eternal ('**for ever**'). However, the shift from the first person, '**we**', to the third person, '**lovers**', projects a growing sense of detachment, as if the speaker were already distancing himself from his previous life.

The speaker's consolatory remark that '**Tonight remains**' refocuses attention on the present moment. His invocation to '**make an end of lying down together**' carries the double sense of bringing things to an end, and finding a sense of purpose – as if physical intimacy were the only '**end**' the lovers can hang on to in a chaotic, directionless age. Their '**lying down together**' is a fight against oblivion, but it is also suggestive of 'playing dead': like actors in a tragedy, the lovers rehearse their future deaths.

(7) Alun Lewis, quoted in Archard, ' "Some Things you See in Detail"', p. 86; Archard, p. 78.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 5 - 8.

These lines demonstrate Lewis's engagement with contemporary trends toward social documentary. Some of this poem's quiet power is derived from what Cary Archard describes as 'fluently controlled, precisely observed details', which create a tangible sense of atmosphere and pathos. (8) Details such as the '**final shilling**' that keeps the room warm and the rustling comb in the woman's hair signal the new importance that accrued to the material world during the war; as critic Gill Plain suggests, 'there was as sense of fighting not so much for ideals as for the material, tactile elements of culture' (9). The sensuality of the scene, as the speaker watches his beloved '**slip [her] dress below [her] knees**', is heightened by the soft sibilants that link '**slip**', '**dress**', '**rustling**', '**knees**' and '**trees**'. Conjuring the sound of the leaves moving in the breeze, they emphasise the stillness and silence that pervade the room. Lewis often linked poetry to 'the natural world and the body', rather than the social world (10). Here, the human merges with the organic, the inside world with the world of nature: the woman's '**rustling comb / Modulate[s] the autumn in the trees**', as if her hair were becoming leaves. Trees are central to Lewis's poetic imagination; he associated woods with words, but also with depths of silence. The reference to autumn is reminiscent of John Keats's famous poem 'To Autumn', which famously depicts Autumn as a time of life and abundance as well as mourning and imminent loss. Through this connection, the dying, rustling leaves suggest the death of love and of literature, yet also retain a hope for their future regeneration.

Lines 9-12.

The stanza begins in the middle of a thought, with 'And', affording the line an informal, almost offhand feel that emulates everyday speech. Linking back to the additive repetition of 'And' in the previous stanza, it conjures a sense of the speaker measuring and counting each moment that is left to him with his beloved. These ordinary moments, which usually slip by unnoticed, are suddenly illuminated and made precious in the context of imminent loss and danger, stored away as one of the 'countless things I will remember'.

(8) Archard, '"Some Things you See in Detail"', p. 89.

(9) Gill Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 7.

(10) Archard, '"Some Things you See in Detail"', p. 83.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 9-12 (continued).

The voice veers towards a prophetic mode in these lines, as if already observing his future death. '**The mummy-cloths of silence round my head**' conjure an entire civilization entombed or embalmed. If the silence of the previous stanza conveyed a moment of salvific peace, here, it becomes ominous, suffocating. It speaks, perhaps, of Lewis's anxieties about the silencing of the poet by war: after an operation following an injury in India, he wrote to his wife to describe how he felt 'swallowed up by the engulfing darkness.' (11) The intrusion of direct speech, with '**We paid a guinea for this bed**', conveys an all-too-human sense of sadness and desperation. They've paid handsomely for the bed – a guinea was a lot of money in 1942 – but this awareness of the cost further emphasises the imminence of their parting: aware of the need to make the most of the time they have, the future inevitably casts a shadow on their present.

Lines 13–16.

This stanza again highlights the importance of small, seemingly insignificant human gestures, and explores the lovers' yearning for continuity and permanence (**'Eternity'**). The fact that the speaker's companion is thinking about the '**next resident**' of the room emphasises a sense of the present moment as almost already in the past due to the fact that time is moving so quickly. The ordinary kindness of leaving flowers and warmth behind for strangers takes on added meaning in the context of wartime austerity. In spite of the fragility of the connection between present and future that these 'gifts' signify (the flowers, after all, are already dead), the gesture links the lovers' story with those of the other strangers who will inhabit the room in the future. In a related sense, the lovers are portrayed as strangers to one another here, unable to bridge the gulf of their sadness and looking away from one another.

Lines 17–20.

Words and actions are imbued with particular tenderness here, as the lovers oscillate between the roles of parent and child. While her kisses maternally 'close my eyes', she, too, is compared to a 'child with nameless fears'. The classical, childlike rhymes of the ballad repeat timeworn associations (fears/tears), but are also evocative of the popular romantic songs of wartime, played on the new technology of the wireless and gramophone. Cary Archard notes that Lewis clearly 'needed the romantic model'; Yeats, Blake and Keats were some of his most important influences (12). This stanza makes use of language and imagery that is directly evocative of the Romantics: the images of 'Time's chalice' and 'limpid useless tears' introduce a sacramental vision to the poem, elevating the lovers' human predicament to the plane of myth.

(11) Alun Lewis, *Letters to My Wife*, ed. Gweno Lewis (Bridgend: Seren, 1989), quoted in Hill, 'Alun Lewis and the search for poetic truth', p. 6.
(12) Archard, '"Some Things You See In Detail"', p. 87.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 21–24.

This stanza considers the tenacity of the ego and individual identity when, under duress, '**Everything we renounce except our selves**', before contemplating the merging of the self with the observed world. Imagining the lovers' sighs as '**exhalations of the earth**', the speaker projects an awareness of depths of time and history, identified with the multitudes of lovers who have become dust before them. Journeying and snow are recurrent tropes in Lewis's writing, often associated with mystical vision. Musing on how '**Our footprints leave a track across the snow**', the speaker can here be seen as courting the transcendental.

Lines 25–28.

The shift to a more sonorous, almost religious tone that was begun in the previous stanza is continued into this one. This change in register is paralleled by a change in metre: the modulations of the speaking voice give way to iambic pentameter, traditionally associated with Shakespearean blank verse and dramatic monologue. The speaker's grand declaration that '**We made the universe to be our home**' imagines the lovers in the role of classical heroes, defying their own mortality by usurping the place of the gods. The image of hearts as '**massive towers of delight**' is a hopeful one, speaking of Lewis's perception of love as a powerful, redemptive presence in the world. Yet the allusion to the tower also gestures intertextually to W.B. Yeats's poem of the same name, in which an aged speaker ponders the 'absurdity' of the 'troubled heart' and declares that he has never had 'an ear and eye/ That more expected the impossible'.

Lines 29–32.

This final stanza retracts from the contemplation of eternity to focus once again on the everyday, material world. The voice resumes a conversational tone: '**Yet when all's done**', and swivels between the past and an unknown future ('**I placed…**'/ 'I **will keep…**'). Here and throughout the poem, the lines are infused with a sense of ambivalence and doubleness. The imagery used establishes tensions between eternity (the '**emerald**' ring) and transience (the '**street**'), violence ('**my old battledress**') and sweetness ('**my sweet**'). But the poem's complexity resolves to the simplicity of the lovers' compact, embodied by the exchange of the ring and the patches sewn onto the speaker's army uniform. As in Lewis's poem 'Raider's Dawn', where a 'Blue necklace left/ On a charred chair' is the only witness to a bombed house's former inhabitants, the speaker projects forward to a time when words have ceased and only material objects (the ring, the patches) remain to hold things together, bearers of a fragmentary memory.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The poems in *Ha*! *Ha*! *Among the Trumpets* were written after autumn 1941, and mostly when Alun Lewis was on service in India. The inner, poetic journey traced by the collection parallels Lewis's lived experience of leave-taking, his sea journey to India via Brazil, and life there as an officer. Many of Lewis's poems and short stories draw on autobiographical elements, taken from the journals that he kept during his time as a soldier. John Pikoulis describes 'Goodbye' as a 'poem of farewell to Gweno' (13) : it perhaps recalls their last night in a hotel together in Liverpool at the end of October 1942, before Lewis's battalion set sail from the docks in the early morning. But it amalgamates any number of their snatched moments together in temporary accommodation during the war.

It is important to realise, however, that although this poem is anchored in lived experience, is should not be seen merely as a poetic record of Lewis's individual story. As Cary Archard points out, he strived constantly to balance his personal, lyric vision with his social conscience (14).The unnamed lovers in this poem, then, are also tragic actors in a more universal drama: their experience, as the poem makes clear, is both extraordinary and ordinary, shared by many others like them during World War II.

The seeming ordinariness of the occasion portrayed in this poem – the lovers '**pack and fix on labels**', as if the soldier were going on holiday – is transfigured by the dignity of their affection and their celebration of intimacy. This interweaving of the romantic with the down-to-earth speaks of Lewis's recognition that 'the gap between realism and romanticism [had] changed and narrowed because of the war' (15): everyday life had become heroic under the pressure of circumstances, and dreams were now essential to survival. However, traditional romantic gender roles are clouded and sometimes reversed in this poem: the speaker-soldier is imbued with fragility (signaled, for instance, by the patches on his uniform), while the lover he leaves behind shows strength in her will for life and continuity. His eyes are closed beneath her kisses, rendering him rather passive, yet hers remain wide open: she '**stare**[s]'. In a letter to Robert Graves, reprinted in *Ha*! *Ha*! *Among the Trumpets*, Lewis wrote, 'I find myself quite unable to express at once the passion of Love, the coldness of Death (Death is cold), and the fire that beats against resignation, 'acceptance'. Acceptance seems so spiritless, protest so vain. In between the two I live' (16). This poem moves between unwilling acceptance in the face of intractable forces of history, and 'the fire that beats against resignation', that is also 'the passion of Love'.

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(13) John Pikoulis, *Alun Lewis: a Life* (Bridgend: Seren, 1991), p. 138.
(14) Cary Archard, '"Some Things you See in Detail, Those You Need": Alun Lewis, Soldier and Poet', in Wales at War: *Critical Essays in Literature and Art*, ed. Tony Curtis (Bridgend: Seren, 2007), pp. 75¬–92 (p. 84).
(15) Archard, '"Some Things You See in Detail"', p. 82.
(16) From a letter quoted by Robert Graves in his introduction to *Ha*! *Ha*! *Among The Trumpets* (London, 1945).

SECTION 4

FOUR QUESTIONS PUPILS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Why does the speaker choose to focus on ordinary, everyday things?

What is the nature of the relationship between the speaker and the addressee? How can you tell?

How is nature portrayed in this poem? What meanings are attached to it?

Is the language of this poem simple or complex? Why?

SECTION 5

(links active August 2018)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

http://1ifb2b1i0hus3prhdk22kden.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/lewis-426x279.jpg

http://1ifb2b1i0hus3prhdk22kden.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/AL.jpeg

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

The War Poets Association website includes a biography and useful links to archival holdings on Alun Lewis:
http://www.warpoets.org/conflicts/world-war-ii/alun-lewis-1915-1944/

The page dedicated to the poet on the National Library of Wales website offers details about the history of the Alun Lewis collection there, as well as biographical information:
https://www.library.wales/discover/digital-gallery/archives/alun-lewis-papers-poetry-ms-1/

Brian Roper's online article in the Wales Arts Review offers a detailed commentary on Lewis and his legacy on the centenary of his death:
http://www.walesartsreview.org/a-tribute-to-alun-lewis-on-his-centenary/

HWB, the Welsh government's online learning resource, has produced a PowerPoint presentation on Lewis's poem 'Goodbye', which offers a starting-point for generating questions and activities surrounding the poem, aimed at secondary school pupils:
http://resources.hwb.wales.gov.uk/VTC/2015/06/02/Poetry1/PowerPoint/Goodbye.pptx

All links are clickable

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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.

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Eiluned Lewis

'Ships' Sirens'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

(pages 39-40 of *Poetry 1900-2000*)

CREW

CONTENTS

3 SECTION 1:
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

4 SECTION 2:
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

7 SECTION 3:
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

8 SECTION 4:
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK

8 SECTION 5:
PHOTOGRAPHS

9 SECTION 6:
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

Janet Eiluned Lewis was born near Newtown in Montgomeryshire (now Powys) in November 1900. Her family was well off, cultured, and educated; for example, Lewis's Welsh-speaking mother earned a Master's degree, had been a headmistress, and was friends with the creator of Peter Pan, J. M. Barrie. Lewis was educated at boarding school and college in London, and worked in journalism for most of her life, notably as a member of the editorial staff of *The Sunday Times* and as a long-term contributor to *Country Life* magazine (1944-1979).

Her first literary success was the novel *Dew on the Grass*, which was a bestseller on its publication in 1934 and won the Gold Medal of the Book Guild for the best novel of the year. Her second novel, *The Captain's Wife*, came out in 1943 and was also 'immediately popular, being reprinted twice within a matter of months' (1). Between these novels Lewis published her first collection of poetry, *December Apples*, in 1935, and a collaborative, non-fiction book with her brother Peter Lewis, entitled *The Land of Wales*, in 1937, which depicted the landscape and people of her native country.

Lewis's second, and final, collection of poetry was published in 1944, called *Morning Songs and Other Poems*. According to literary critic Katie Gramich, Lewis's poems are 'lyrical and song-like, almost invariably expressing a sense of loss, nostalgia or longing' (2).

Lewis married in 1937 and moved to rural Surrey, where she lived until her death in April 1979. Despite the success of her literary career in the 1930s and 1940s, Lewis's fame waned over the following decades; however, her novels have been republished recently amid a new scholarly interest in female Welsh writers of the twentieth century.

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(1) Katie Gramich, Introduction to *The Captain's Wife* by Eiluned Lewis (Dinas Powys: Honno, 2012), p. ii.
(2) Katie Gramich, *Twentieth-Century Women's Writing in Wales: Land, Gender, Belonging* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), p. 84.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.
'Ships' Sirens' comes from Eiluned Lewis's 1935 poetry collection December Apples, which features poems on lost childhood, the end of summer, and the relentless passing of time. The title of this poem immediately conjures a coastal or maritime context, and a hint of peril is indicated by the sirens. These could be the actual warning devices on the boats, but the word also suggests the characters from Greek mythology who lured sailors to their death.

Form.
The form of the poem is two regular stanzas of six lines (sixains), each line consisting of ten syllables (apart from line 10, which has eleven). Most lines finish with a completed unit of sense (that is, they are end-stopped), with only line 9 completing its meaning in the next line (enjambment). All this gives the poem a wide and steady appearance on the page that contrasts with the chop and motion of the sea that provides the poem's backdrop. The rhyme scheme of each stanza is also consistent: four lines where the second and fourth rhyme (a ballad quatrain), finished with a rhyming couplet – ABCB AA and DEFE GG. With reference to the voice of the poem, it is often tempting to think of the person speaking as the poet themself, but a poem is rarely a directly autobiographical account of the poet's life and the central character of this poem should be seen as a literary construction, rather than a direct representation of Lewis.
Lines 1 - 3.
The word order (syntax) of these lines is unusual, showing the difference between poetry and prose. Where a person would more likely say 'I've often thought of you on foggy nights', the speaker of this poem chooses to start with the adverb **'Often'**; this highlights the importance of the frequency of the speaker's reminiscences, as well as the deliberate artificiality of the poem's syntax. The emotional state of the speaker is a key issue in this poem; that the trigger for their recollections are **'foggy nights'** offers only an ambiguous clue to the subsequent tone of the poem. If it were rainy nights or sunny mornings that provoked the memories of the speaker, the reader might be able to speculate, through association, whether the thoughts were negative or positive. However, the next two lines explain why the fog prompts the speaker's memories: it causes the ships to use their horns, a sound that the speaker asserts their ex-partner would enjoy. The ships are strange, ghostly figures **('spectre vessels')** and the use of the verb **'creep'** to describe their motion is odd, as it is a word perhaps more associated with the movement of animals. There is a potential pun in the word **'booming'**, which refers to the loudness of the sirens, but also suggests a boom, the pole at the bottom of a ship's sail. It is worth noting the conjecture in the third line; the speaker does not say that the addressee **('you')** loved these sirens, but **'would love'** them. This means they have not experienced these sirens together, subtly indicating the separation between them.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 4–6.

The speaker is clearly affected by their memories of the relationship, as they regularly lull themselves to sleep with thoughts of their ex-partner. Night-time is described, rather strangely, as **'ghostly-footed'**, suggesting the speaker is haunted and chased by their thoughts. The speaker then uses a simile to compare their relief at finally falling asleep to a sailor who spies land, **'Like some glad mariner when port's in sight'**, which continues the maritime theme of the poem. By the end of the first stanza, it is not clear whether the speaker and the addressee have split up, or if the addressee has died. The words 'spectre' and 'ghostly' suggest the latter as a possibility, but it cannot be determined for sure at this stage of the poem whether a physical death has occurred, or a metaphorical one of the relationship. What can be said is this stanza has two instances of 'I', but three of 'you', revealing how much the speaker focuses on the absent addressee.

Lines 7-9.

The maritime metaphors increase as this stanza progresses. In line 7 the speaker says **'that's all over'**, but what is 'that', exactly? Presumably it is the relationship, but the speaker cannot bring themselves to specify the matter. Instead, a wave of metaphors carry their thoughts and feelings. The **'cargo'**, the merchandise being transported, is **'lost'**, suggesting some kind of disaster at sea, but one with a commercial, material angle – the speaker does not say that the crew perished, only the objects being shipped. The cargo metaphorically represents the love between the speaker and the addressee, and the repetition of **'all'** in this line underlines the extent of the speaker's conviction that the romance is entirely finished. Line 8 extends the metaphor of the relationship from the cargo to the whole boat, **'Our ship of dreams'**, which didn't sink at sea but has been taken to a **'breaker's yard'**. Rather than going down in a dramatic accident, perhaps as a result of forces of nature, the methodical dismantling of the boat suggests a deliberately planned end to the relationship. The speaker says they will no longer **'repine'** (*OED*: 'fret; be discontented'), but will join with the addressee to make a statement.

Lines 10–12.

The statement, which the speaker declares is being delivered in unison with the addressee, is that their relationship, **'our joint voyage'**, was doomed from the start, having been **'from the first ill-starred'**. That the speaker can make a joint declaration, in the present, about the affair suggests that the addressee is still alive, and so it is the relationship that is dead, not the other participant. The adjective 'ill-starred' is quite a literary word – used in Shakespeare's *Othello*, for instance (3) – and indicates the rather highbrow word choice (diction) of the speaker.

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(3) William Shakespeare, Othello, Act 5, Scene 2.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 10-12 (continued).
It is also a fitting term to use in this maritime-themed poem when you consider early sailors used the stars to navigate the seas. In contrast to the first stanza, in which 'you' was the most common word, **'our'** is the most repeated in this stanza. The frequency of this first person plural determiner suggests a change of position in the speaker's thought process: from talking to the addressee at the start, the speaker is now placing themselves alongside their ex-partner, creating, however briefly and incompletely, a form of reunion. The poem concludes with two consecutive rhyming lines (a rhyming couplet); rhyme is often used by poets to draw further attention to specific words, and the rhyme here encourages the reader to appreciate the importance of **'fears'** and **'tears'** to this poem. The speaker has just claimed they will no longer 'repine' about the end of the affair, but now they admit that when the **'sirens cry'**, they will, too. The sirens are imagined in human terms (anthropomorphised) as if they had their own fears to express, when in fact the speaker is projecting their emotional state onto what are simply machines. Ultimately, and no matter how hard the speaker tries to change, the unhappy memories will **'return in tide of tears'**, and this metaphorical tide appears to be as impossible to stop as the real thing.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'Ships' Sirens' contains similar themes to the other poems in Eiluned Lewis's 1935 collection *December Apples*: loss, longing, and nostalgia. Written in the first person ('I'), the poem offers the reader access to the most personal and intimate thoughts of the speaker. By directly addressing their ex-partner in the second person ('you'), the reader is, at times uncomfortably so, pulled directly into the middle of the emotional drama.

As in most good poetry, a productive ambiguity forms a central part of 'Ships' Sirens', as ideas are suggested and presented metaphorically, rather than being expressly declared. In this way, no single interpretation of the poem can be seen as the correct one and it is left to the reader to make up their own mind. For example, a couple of key questions to take into consideration when reading this poem are: what is the status of the addressee (are they alive or dead?), do the speaker and the addressee reach any kind of agreement or understanding by the end, and what kind of closure, if any, does the speaker find?

In addition, tempting as it is to think of the speaker of 'Ships' Sirens' as Lewis herself, there is nothing concrete in the poem to show that the speaker is a woman and the addressee a man. On the one hand, a stereotypical view of women as being more in touch with their emotions might lead the reader to assume the 'tide of tears' from the poem's final line indicates the speaker is female. On the other hand, however, the speaker compares their situation in the first stanza with that of a 'mariner', which was traditionally an overwhelmingly male occupation. Likewise, the poem tells the reader next to nothing about the addressee, beyond the opinion that they would probably enjoy the sound of the ships' foghorns. As a result, the reader must make their own assumptions about the identity of the poem's two characters.

In the end, it is arguable whether the speaker finds solace in their situation: the poem starts with an acknowledgment that they are still regularly tormented by thoughts of the addressee, and though they then claim they will no longer express their unhappiness, the poem finishes with an admission that there will be more tears in the future. However, the idea of an uncontrollable passion needs to be set against the regular, precise form and rhyme scheme of 'Ships' Sirens', which reminds the reader that this is a planned and calculated poem.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

How important to the poem is the image of the ship – and why?

How simple or complicated is the language that the poem uses?

How does the form of the poem on the page play a part in the poem's meaning?

Is this mainly a poem of regret, or is it more about exploring big ideas such as love and loss?

SECTION 5

(links active August 2018)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

There are very few photographs easily available of Eiluned Lewis; for example, there is one photograph of her from 1934 in the National Portrait Gallery, but it has not been digitised for their website. Here is a link to a book-review blog that features an image of Lewis:

• **http://dovegreyreader.typepad.com/dovegreyreader_scribbles/2009/11/dew-on-the-grass-by-eiluned-lewis.html**

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Review from 1944 of Lewis's Morning Songs and Other Poems, the other poems being a reprint of December Apples, including 'Ships' Sirens':

http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/13th-october-1944/22/morning-songs-and-other-poems-by-eiluned-lewis-mac

All links are clickable

ADRIAN OSBOURNE

CREW: Centre for Research into the English Literature and Language of Wales, Swansea University
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.

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Eiluned Lewis

'The Bride Chest'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

(pages 38-39 of *Poetry 1900-2000*)

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CONTENTS

3 SECTION 1: BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

4 SECTION 2: LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

7 SECTION 3: COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

8 SECTION 4: FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK

8 SECTION 5: PHOTOGRAPHS

9 SECTION 6: LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

Janet Eiluned Lewis was born near Newtown in Montgomeryshire (now Powys) in November 1900. Her family was well off, cultured, and educated; for example, Lewis's Welsh-speaking mother earned a Master's degree, had been a headmistress, and was friends with the creator of Peter Pan, J. M. Barrie. Lewis was educated at boarding school and college in London, and worked in journalism for most of her life, notably as a member of the editorial staff of *The Sunday Times* and as a long-term contributor to *Country Life* magazine (1944-1979).

Her first literary success was the novel *Dew on the Grass*, which was a bestseller on its publication in 1934 and won the Gold Medal of the Book Guild for the best novel of the year. Her second novel, *The Captain's Wife*, came out in 1943 and was also 'immediately popular, being reprinted twice within a matter of months' (1). Between these novels Lewis published her first collection of poetry, *December Apples*, in 1935, and a collaborative, non-fiction book with her brother Peter Lewis, entitled *The Land of Wales*, in 1937, which depicted the landscape and people of her native country.

Lewis's second, and final, collection of poetry was published in 1944, called *Morning Songs and Other Poems*. According to literary critic Katie Gramich, Lewis's poems are 'lyrical and song-like, almost invariably expressing a sense of loss, nostalgia or longing' (2).

Lewis married in 1937 and moved to rural Surrey, where she lived until her death in April 1979. Despite the success of her literary career in the 1930s and 1940s, Lewis's fame waned over the following decades; however, her novels have been republished recently amid a new scholarly interest in female Welsh writers of the twentieth century.

(1) Katie Gramich, Introduction to *The Captain's Wife* by Eiluned Lewis (Dinas Powys: Honno, 2012), p. ii.
(2) Katie Gramich, *Twentieth-Century Women's Writing in Wales: Land, Gender, Belonging* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), p. 84.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'The Bride Chest' comes from Eiluned Lewis's 1935 poetry collection December Apples, which features poems on lost childhood, the end of summer, and the relentless passing of time. The title of this poem refers to the tradition of giving a bride a chest, or a trunk, on her wedding night containing useful items for the setting up of a new home, such as tablecloths, bedding, towels, and so on. 'The Bride Chest' was published two years before Lewis married at the age of 37, so it is tempting to ascribe the poignant description of the unused items in the chest to Lewis's fear of spinsterhood. But a poem is rarely a directly autobiographical account of the poet's life and the central character of this poem should be seen as a literary construction, rather than a direct representation of Lewis.

Form.

The form of the poem is three regular stanzas of eight lines (octaves), with each stanza ending in a full stop. The lines are alternately long and short, provide a rising and falling rhythm throughout the poem that is reinforced by the rhyme scheme of ABCB DEFE, with the short lines in each stanza linked together by rhyme. While the female figure depicted in the poem appears sad and alone, the consistently recurring form of the stanzas gives the poem a continuity that suggests life will go on.

Lines 1 - 4.

Not only does the bride chest provide the title for the poem, it is also the first thing described in it, indicating the central importance of the eponymous object. It **'stands in the room'**, perhaps like a guard or sentry, in contrast with the **'kneeling girl'**, which gives the chest a superior or dominant position. However, the chest is stored in a **'little room'** at the top of a **'winding stair'**, which sounds like an attic, the kind of room where items that have no day-to-day use are stored. Although the bride chest is the central symbol of the poem, it is peripheral to the daily domestic life of the house. The female figure who kneels before it, as if in prayer, is a **'girl'** with **'yellow hair'**, which suggests she is young rather than old.

Lines 5–8.

The poet uses synecdoche to describe people by their parts and attributes: **'voices and feet'**. The choice of these particular features suggests the noise and movement of children, but this is not explicitly stated. The house is anthropomorphised, presented as if it were human with a **'mouth'** that can be silenced. The overall feeling from this first stanza is that the visit to the bride chest is one of quiet contemplation away from the stresses of life, but even this moment of peace has to be fought for – **'silence wins'**, as if it were a contest between opposing teams.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 9-12.
The word order (syntax) of these lines is unusual, showing the difference between poetry and prose. Where a person would usually say 'The linen she sorts and smooths is old and cool', here the adjectives **'Old and cool'** take first position. Perhaps the poet wishes to emphasise the linen's material qualities, but this technique also brings attention to the poem's own deliberate construction. This inverted word order also allows the rhyme between the lines ending **'thread'** and **'bed'**, which otherwise would read 'the thread [is] fine' and 'their bed [is] still wide'. Death is introduced in lines 11 and 12, in which the makers of the **'linen'** and the **'lovers'** (presumably previous users of the linen) are **'dust'**. The enduring world of manufactured objects is contrasted with the fleeting impermanence of human life.

Lines 13-16.
The tone of the poem continues to darken. The **'Fortunate lovers'** are envied for the peaceful happy times they lived in, as opposed to the present time of **'fears'** (note the plural). The children were originally party to the better days, but now they, too, suffer. The use of the word **'nourished'** is ironic because a diet of tears would be anything but nutritious. The word choice (diction) in this stanza hints at religious undertones, with **'dust'** being used twice (as in 'dust to dust', from the funeral service in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer) and **'begotten'** rather than the more prosaic 'born'. Rhyme is often used by poets to add further significance and intensity to what they are saying, in which case the key terms in these lines are **'fears'** and **'tears'**.

Lines 17-20.
The scene now changes, moving from the room with the bride chest to the world outside the house. Again the word order is inverted and consciously poetic, with the subject of the first clause – the **'summer rain'** – coming last. Rain in summer may be unwelcome, but it is not an altogether unknown experience in Wales; however, the rain here also '**whisper**[s]' as it falls, an ambiguous description that could suggest peace, or something more sinister. The **'frosts of May**' provide a much stronger sense of something wrong with the natural order, as the trees that should be ready for sunshine and warm weather are attacked by the cold as if it were winter. This leads to the rhetorical question: **'Will they flower again?'**. This indicates a fear that life has come to an end, that the unexpected cold has prematurely extinguished the possibility of new life and growth. But who is asking this question? Is it the (potential) bride as she looks out of the window and into the garden? Is the reader hearing her thoughts? Or is the poem's narrator intruding here? Again, ambiguity is vital in opening up possibilities for the reader to think about.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 21-24.
The blackbirds **'chuckle'**, which is again an ambiguous term that could be interpreted positively, but considered in line with the tone of the poem seems more to suggest mocking or sinister behaviour. The choice of **'chuckle'** to describe the blackbirds' song appears incongruous and anthropomorphic, but it is a term that has been used before in poetry (see section 7 - Links to Useful Web Resources). The swallow is a long-distance migratory bird that leaves the UK for Africa when winter approaches. The confusion about the season in the poem, caused by the image of the **'frosts of May'**, creates an ambiguity as to whether the swallows are continuing their stay in the UK or beginning their long journey south. By the end of the stanza and the poem, the reader is returned to the kneeling girl, but the nature of this transition is unclear: **'Pale hangs the lilac, and pale the face / Of the kneeling bride.'** Does lilac here represent the flowers in the garden, or is some of the linen in the bride chest lilac-coloured? Both possibilities lie open, and in either case the paleness of the female figure is emphasised by the repetition of the word. The poem ends by revealing that the girl going through the chest is the bride, information which forces a reassessment of the previous stanzas. In the first stanza, the female figure is only described as a girl, so looking through the chest could be a form of playing. By stating in this final line that the girl is the bride, the significance of the chest to her, and her emotional attachment to it, is hugely increased.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'The Bride Chest' encapsulates the main themes and mood of Eiluned Lewis's 1935 poetry collection, *December Apples*: loss, longing, and nostalgia. As in most good poetry, ambiguity is central to 'The Bride Chest', as ideas are suggested and intimated rather than being expressly declared. As such, a multiplicity of interpretations are possible with this poem, and one reading suggests that the heart of the poem is the absence of the groom, the bride's husband. This individual is unnamed and never directly mentioned, but he hovers just beyond the text, haunting it. If he is now **'dust'**, his trace can only be detected in the sadness of the children left behind and the mourning bride, who escapes to the room to be alone and reminisce. The cause of this rupture to the family unit is also left unstated; the poem predates the Second World War by four years, so it cannot be due to that conflict, but it could be a response to the huge loss of life in the First World War that ended seventeen years before. However, this can only be guesswork, and ultimately the cause of the **'coming of fears'** is much less important than its effects.

The poem begins almost as if it were a fairy tale, with winding stairs and a chest that seems to have a magical aura. Like a lot of fairy tales, there is a sinister aspect to this poem, which operates just below the surface: in the first stanza, people are reduced to disembodied parts and the house is silenced; in the second stanza, people are turned to dust, beds are empty, and the children's lives are filled with crying; in the third stanza, nature has become hostile and possibly scornful, and the female figure lacks vitality. However, the strength of this poem comes from its ability to also offer some hope for the future. The extremely regular form and rhyme scheme of the stanzas suggest life can, and will, go on. The first stanza shows that the bride achieves peace when she visits the chest; the second stanza relates that, at least, life had been good previously and memories of the **'fortunate lovers'** and the time of **'plenty'** might offer some solace; and in the third stanza, rain falls, which usually brings a garden to life. In fact, this final stanza is key to a more optimistic reading of the poem: the rhetorical question of whether the trees will flower again is not answered in the negative, and the image of a tree, which can look dead in winter but return to life in summer, could indicate that everything that happens is part of a natural cycle. Finally, it is perhaps relevant to observe that lilac was associated with the mourning process in Victorian times. The first period of deep mourning saw the bereaved wearing black; however, the progress towards returning to normal life involved a stage called 'half-mourning', in which colours such as lilac would be worn. In light of this, the lilac linked in the poem to the bride could suggest she is nearing the end of the grieving process and, when the trees flower again, will find hope in the future.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What does the image of the bride chest make you think about?

How simple or complicated is the language that the poem uses?

How does the form of the poem on the page play a part in the poem's meaning?

Is this mainly a poem of mourning about one specific person, or is it more about exploring big ideas such as life, death, and love?

SECTION 5

(links active August 2018)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

There are very few photographs easily available of Eiluned Lewis; for example, there is one photograph of her from 1934 in the National Portrait Gallery, but it has not been digitised for their website. Here is a link to a book-review blog which features an image of Lewis:

- **http://dovegreyreader.typepad.com/dovegreyreader_scribbles/2009/11/dew-on-the-grass-by-eiluned-lewis.html**

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Review from 1944 of Lewis's Morning Songs and Other Poems, the other poems being a reprint of December Apples, including 'The Bride Chest':

http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/13th-october-1944/22/morning-songs-and-other-poems-by-eiluned-lewis-mac

A poem by George Horton published in 1890, 'A Vacation Acquaintance', includes the phrase 'blackbird's chuckle' (p. 3, left hand column):

https://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC/grange/1890/grange_visitor_18901015.pdf

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.

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Hilary Llewellyn-Williams

‘The Sealwife’

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

(page 706–7 of *Poetry 1900–2000*)

CREW

CONTENTS

3 SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

4 SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

11 SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

12 SECTION 4 :
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK

12 SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS

13 SECTION 6 :
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

14 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.)

Hilary Llewellyn-Williams was born in Kent in 1951, but moved to Wales in 1982. She has lived in west Wales and Waunfelin near Pontypool, and has now settled in Abergavenny. After studying English and Theology at the Southhampton University, she forged a successful career as a poet and teacher of creative writing. She has produced five poetry collections: *The Tree Calendar* (1987), *Book of Shadows* (1990) *Animaculture* (1997), *Hummadruz* (2001), and *Greenland* (2003). As the titles of these books might suggest, her poetry is marked by a direct, sensuous engagement with the natural environment, and shows a concerted interest in the myths and literary traditions of her adopted homeland. Described by one critic as one of the 'radical green voices' which emerged in Welsh and British poetry over the last decades of the twentieth century, Llewellyn-William's work explores our often destructive relationship – yet deep interdependency with – the natural world, often from a gendered, feminist angle.[1] As a poet, Llewellyn-Williams also demonstrates a faith in the healing powers of the imagination, as well as concern with the hidden workings of the human psyche. She now works full-time as an accredited counsellor.

(1) Terry Gifford, *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 165.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'The Sealwife' is taken from Llewellyn-Williams's second book of poems, *Book of Shadows* (1990). The poem's title suggests that this text will turn upon the story of a female figure, whose identity is rendered all the more mysterious by the title given to her here. We become aware that the convention of identifying a woman according to her marital status (that is, as a 'wife') acts to obscure who she really is. Is this woman married to a sea creature? How? Or is she herself an animal? If **'Sealwife'** has a certain blunt matter-of-factness to it, it is also mysterious, engendering our desire to find out more about this enigmatic person. It prepares us for a poem that will set out to explore female identity, and how this can be constrained ('**seal**ed' up?) by marriage and social conventions. Yoking together two very different words in a single compound noun, the title indicates that inner division and 'hybridity' (or doubleness) will also be key themes.

Form.

'The Sealwife' offers an imaginative rewriting of the Celtic 'selkie' myth. According to folk traditions associated with the Northern Isles of Scotland, the Faroe Isles and Iceland, the selkie is a magical creature, capable of transforming from a seal into a beautiful, lithe human. Endowed with magical capacities for metamorphosis, the selkie, once transformed into human form, was said to dance on lonely stretches of moonlit shore, or bask in the sun on rocky outcrops. While selkies can be of any gender or age (another name for them is, in the Scots language, *selkie fowk*, seal people), a common theme is one in which a cunning young man acquires the sealskin of a selkie-woman. Prevented from returning to the sea, she is obliged to marry her captor, until, one day, her skin is returned, and she once again heads back to the sea.

As befits the poem's desire to explore its central character's inner world, it takes the form of a lyric, spoken in the first-person voice of **'The Sealwife'** herself, and addressed, as we discover in stanza 3, to an unnamed figure who is supposedly her husband. The lyric poem is the favoured vehicle for expressing personal feelings, and giving a 'voice' to the selkie woman is key to the feminist intentions of this poem. **'The Sealwife'** is comprised of 13 stanzas: 12 three-line tercets, with a fragmentary one-line stanza at the end. The pace of the tercet is often slower and more sombre than the more popular couplet or quatrain (four-line stanza), and here it is used to great effect to evoke the mourning and longing of the selkie for the sea. Tercets are easily read and the flow of the lines evokes the rolling waves of the sea.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

The constricted nature of the tercet in terms of lines and words successfully projects the sealwife's sense of frustration in the face of marriage and domesticity, where **'love is trapped between the walls of a house'** (l. 19). Yet the brevity of the form also allows for an impactful concentration of image and narrative, and builds momentum as we sense the selkie's day of escape drawing nearer and nearer (**'It won't be long now'**, l. 35). Although written largely in free verse, the frequent use of iambic pentameter draws this misunderstood creature's speech into the realm of dramatic monologue, elevating and heightening her story. The selkie speaker's economy of speech points to the limits of human-made language, alluding to the thoughts and memories she is unable to express. Uneven rhythms and unconventional grammar and syntax (**'I plunged and swam for my own joy'** (l.17), **'it won't be long now, the waiting'** (l. 35) suggest that this creature is not addressing us in her maternal tongue, but rather in a **'language / learnt slowly, word by word.'** (ll. 21–22).

Lines 1–6.
This poem opens quietly but impactfully with the statement: **'One day I shall find my skin again'** (l. 1). For all the confidence and determination of the emphatic **'I shall'** – an effect heightened by the accentual stress that falls on the first (**'One'**) and third syllables (**'I'**) of the line – the aura of mystery established by the title remains. The colon at the end of line 1 conveys a dramatic pause that leaves several questions hanging. What kind of creature is the speaker? How did she lose her skin? Is she alive, or dead? The punctuation of the first stanza creates a driving momentum that signals the speaker's strength, and eagerness to tell her tale: for all the unusualness of her speech, this is someone – something – who is in control of her own narrative.

The speaker's longed-for **'salt skin'** (l. 2), we realise, is central to her identity, and she dwells at some length on its contour and scent, describing it in terms that engage all the senses. **'[M]y own salt skin'** (l. 2) conjures the taste of sweat and tears on the tip of the tongue, while also suggesting that the sea itself is her skin, with no real separation between herself and the water. **'Folded dark'** (l. 2) is an odd, almost awkward construction: evoking a layered, secret space, its use of **'dark'** rather than, as we might perhaps expect, the adverb 'darkly', reinforces the elemental concreteness of the language. Gradually, we receive more clues to the nature of this **'skin'** in the **'fishweed stink / and tang'** (ll. 2–3) whose memory the speaker seems to savour. Evoking the iodine scent of the sea, it also suggests there is something excessive, almost overpowering about this skin – it is an object of disgust, just as the female body has stereotypically been seen as an object of fear or disgust in conservative, patriarchal culture. The **'thick warm fat'** (l. 3), with its layer of protection, generates further maternal associations, while the **'great thrusting tail'** (l. 3) associates the skin with muscular power and movement, blurring gender divisions. This effect of force and forward moment is again reinforced at the level of form, in the alliteration that, drawing on Old English poetry and the tenets of Welsh cynghanedd, extends across half-lines (**'salt skin / stink'**, **'tang / thrusting tail'**). It is as if the speaker is revelling in the sensory dimensions of language as well as the memory of her skin, while the intricate internal sound correspondences point to the interconnectedness of her sense of the world.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

'[A]ll mine' (ll. 4–5): the speaker proudly announces her ownership over her skin, which we can see in broader terms as a proud assertion of a woman's rightful ownership over her own body, from which she has been dispossessed. The playful, musical rhyme, **'I'll take it and shake it out / to the wind'**, (ll. 4–5) mimics the domestic act of shaking out a carpet or old garment; the suggestion is of a kind of cleansing and renewal. The sealwife's prediction that she will **'laugh softly'** (l. 6) alludes to joy and female pleasure, as well as her triumphant disobedience of the conventional order of things in her imagined assertion of freedom.

Lines 7–12.
The speaker addresses the listener directly, introducing a dialogic element: **'I shall find my stolen skin, hidden by you / for love (you said)'** (ll. 7–8). She begins to reveal the backstory to her search for her skin, which resonates closely with folkloric tales of the selkie: the listener fell in love with her after seeing her in her human form, dancing with the other *selkie fowk* at night, and hid her skin **'in some cleft in the rocks'** (l. 9) so that, unable to resume her animal form, she would be obliged to live with him. The parenthetical **'you said'** reveals that she is answering back to a competing version of this story; it also introduces a note of scepticism, suggesting that the selkie's husband used the idea of romantic **'love'** to justify what was in fact curiosity and the arrogant desire to take possession – even if that meant denying the selkie her freedom of change and self-expression, as symbolised by her dancing. The husband's theft of the sealwife's skin might be seen as a parable for the problematic power relations between not just men and women, but people and nature, too.

The **'cleft in the rocks'** is suggestive of how the sealwife's self-identity is pushed underground. It also speaks of the split in her identity that occurs when she is forced to deny the seal part of her existence. Nonetheless, the fluid musicality of these lines is accentuated by the dactylic metre (**'hidden by you'**, **'sea-people danced'** (ll. 7–8) and enjambment across the stanzas, as she dreams of the place **'I may not go / but used to go, and dance too, stepping free'** (ll. 9–10). It is as if the language is defiantly enacting the dance that the sealwife has been essentially forbidden to do. The imagery of stanza 4 is markedly strange, almost surreal: 'the **'peeled'** (l. 11) body suggests the freshness and newness of the skin that is revealed each time she assumes human form, like a prawn **'peeled'** of its shell; it also perhaps alludes to the idea that, for the desiring lover, she was nothing more than a delicious fruit, ripe for consumption. The fall of the line break between lines 11–12 enacts a sudden, surrealistic shift in scale: **'The stalks of my legs in the moon-/ light strange, my long arms shaping the sky'** (ll. 11–12). It is as if, in dancing, her body becomes the moon, her legs, alien-like, like vegetal stalks touching the earth; it is an image of a lost interconnection between the earthly and celestial realms, turning ordinary perspective on its head.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 13–18.
Again, the enjambment across stanzas hints at a fluidity of memory and 'excess' of speech that overflow the narrow confinements of the tercet form (we might recall that 'sealwife' is semantically similar to 'fishwife', that pejorative idiom for a woman who supposedly talks too much). Here we find the sealwife lamenting that while once **'my long arms shap[ed] the sky'** (l. 12), implying an almost goddess-like power, now they **'have narrowed their circles down / to the tasks of these forked hands'** (ll. 13–14). The nature-rituals of the dancing selkie have turned into the gendered rituals of domesticity and motherhood: **'lifting, /fetching, stirring, scrubbing, embracing'** (ll. 14–15). There is a tangible sense of claustrophobia here, as if the sky itself, not just the movement of her arms, had **'narrowed'**. **'[F]orked hands'** is an interesting image; it implies that not only has the speaker's body become a tool, an instrument of physical labour, but it has also become the very earth that is being worked upon, expected to yield crop (in the form of children). Her **'forked hands'** offer a suggestive contrast with the 'whole' flippers of a seal, whose five digits are webbed, allowing efficient propulsion through the water. The implication is again that, caught as she is between seal and human worlds, the speaker's identity is not whole, but divided; no longer adapted to her own 'element', the water, she has become a 'stranger to herself'.[2]

'Forked' is also the word used by Dylan Thomas to describe the speech of 'wise men' in his poem 'Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night': 'Because their words had forked no lightning they / Do not go gentle into that good night.'[3] Thomas's poem alludes to the doubleness and splitting of language and identity that scholars see as a cornerstone of Welsh writing in English. We might note, too, that the sealwife seems to follow the advice of Thomas's speaker to not 'go gentle' by refusing quiet acquiescence to her fate.

It is fitting that lines 13 and 16 are the shortest, in terms of syllables, of the entire poem: **'narrowed their circles down'** (l. 13) and **'stiff landlocked movements'** (l. 16). The unnatural, mechanical movements to which the speaker is now confined by her life on land is emphasised here by the hard consonant sounds of **'stiff'** and **'lock'** (the double 'ff' of 'stiff', like the double 'll' of 'small', emulating in visual terms a double wall or barrier). The sea, we realise, is associated by the speaker with bodily freedom and the ability to take pleasure in her body: as a seal she swam **'for my own joy'** (l.17). The idea of the sea as a metaphor for transgressive female desire is made apparent here, when she tells us that she **'loved at will in rolling-belly tides'** (l. 18) – a phrase that, full of movement, again dissolves divisions between the selkie's individual body and the body of the sea.

(2) See Julia's Kristeva's book on the idea of internal foreignness, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York and Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1997).

(3) Dylan Thomas, 'Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night', in *Poetry 1900-2000*, ed. Meic Stephens (Cardigan: Parthian, 2007), p. 165.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 19–24.
Moving away from her memories of freedom to consider her present situation, the sealwife reflects on how **'love is trapped between the walls of a house / and in your voice and eyes'** (ll. 19–20). It is not only the sealwife, but love itself that is **'trapped'** by the gender roles and enforced behaviours demanded by domestic, married life. The idea of love as **'trapped…in your voice and eyes'** uses the romantic trope – almost a cliché – of being lost in, and bewitched by, the lover's eyes, to make a feminist comment on the way in which women are seen to have substance and identity only through the male gaze.

The themes of language and identity, female transgression and 'man-made' law, come to the fore clearly in these stanzas. She understands, we are told, the **'boundaries'** (l. 21) of **'our children's cries'** (l. 20). The children's cries mark humans' sense of separation from one another, while also signalling the **'boundaries'** placed on the selkie's freedom by their need for her. These **'boundaries'** are **'a language / learnt slowly, word by word'** (ll. 21–2). She too, has had to learn a human language not her own – one which leaves her little room to manoeuvre, and is certainly no compensation for her **'skin'**.

Stanza 8 complicates what we know about the relationship between the sealwife and her husband, portraying the absent partner in a more positive light than in previous lines. She admits that **'you've been dear and good'** (l. 22), and goes on to exclaim nostalgically, **'how you would sing to me, those wild nights!'** (l. 23). In their mutual love and physical desire, her husband once made attempts to speak *her* language, transforming herself into a kind of sea creature in their shared passion: **'dip[ping] down / to taste my sea-fluids'** (ll. 24–5). The sensuous **'sea-fluids'** contrast with the repulsion implied by the **'fishweed stink'** in the first stanza, while the oil he applies to her breasts seems to recall, in a more attractive and palatable way, the **'thick warm fat'** of her seal skin.

Her husband's ability to physically celebrate and understand the selkie's human form is seen to bring back positive echoes of her animal past. But the suggestion lingers that while her skin appeared powerfully distasteful when she was alone, swimming with a **'great thusting tale'**, it was considered nourishing and alluring when attending to male desires.

We are left to ponder the conundrum: was the sealwife's enjoyment of her sexuality at the price of her solitary freedom?

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 25–30.

The poem takes a melancholy turn here, as the speaker remembers the life and creatures she has had to abandon in the name of her current relationship. Forgetfulness – the lovers' gift and curse – is here associated with a loss of identity: **'I'd forget to mourn / those others then, trawling the flickering deeps.'** (ll. 25–6). The sealwife demonstrates feelings of responsibility to the creaturely communities from whence she came: the word **'mourn'** suggests not only that she misses them, but also that their lives have come under threat in a human-dominated world. Her previous life is now buried deep in her psyche, leaving her **'trawling the flickering deeps'** in an attempt to remember. Her past has become like an old film, a flickering memory, and her body and dreams register a loss that her waking mind struggles to remember: **'Now I cry for no reason, and dream of seals'** (l. 27). This is 'the problem that has no name', the profound malaise that feminist Betty Friedan famously diagnosed in American housewives during the 1950s in her book *The Feminine Mystique*.[4] The poet continues to play with scale in these lines, as the speaker describes how **'an ocean booms in the far cave of my ear'** (l. 28), the external world becoming one with the inner world of the body. Racked by competing calls on her attention, the selkie adopts the conventional position of the domesticated woman: **'I stand here at the window, / listening.'** (ll. 29–30) Her use of the present tense gives her waiting a kind of urgent immediacy, and sound becomes a means of connecting herself with her wider environment.

(4) Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), p. 15.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 31-7.

Stanza 11 explores the sealwife's perception of her children and their relationship with her. Challenging assumptions of motherly closeness and tenderness, she admits to a sense of distance between her and her offspring: **'Our children sleep, / and by daylight they run from me'** (ll. 30-1), as if instinctively sensing her difference. The myth that mothers are entirely fulfilled by satisfying their children's emotional needs is questioned here, as they demonstrate their independence. The sense of separation is further emphasised when, in contrast to the changeability and ambiguity of the selkie, the bodies and identities of her human children are portrayed as firm and fixed. This solidity – an effect of their familiarity with solid ground – is highlighted by the use of sibilance, which draws emphasis to their **'strong'** (l. 32) legs, **'straight'** (l. 32) backs, and **'bodies at ease / on solid ground'** (ll. 32-3). There are hints, however, that they may have inherited more from their mother than may have been immediately apparent. They, too, are drawn to undecidable, liminal places: they **'play for hours on the shore'** (l. 33) and **'scramble the wet rocks'** (l. 34), the omission of any preposition perhaps suggesting they are happy to **'scramble'**, rather than fix, identity, as is the usual human way. A sense of anticipation, almost inevitability, is introduced into this part of the selkie's tale: **'It won't be long now, the waiting'** (l. 35). She is like Branwen, the Welsh princess of the *Mabinogion*, waiting at her window in Ireland for her people to come across the sea to rescue her from an unhappy marriage. The poem's ending is ambiguous, fragmentary: **'they love to poke and forage in the cracks / of the cliffs; sharpeyed, calling, waving'** (ll. 36-7). Does this imply that her children are soon to discover her skin hidden in the rocks? The folk tales of the selkie usually end when the skin is returned by one of the selkie-wife's children, who sometimes accompany her to the sea, and sometimes remain on land with their human father. But could these concluding lines also refer to the selkie's seal kind, calling and waving at her to join them? The stand-alone final line conjures a feeling of isolation, an impression of breaking off and away; it is unclear whether this is the isolation the selkie is feeling stuck on the land, away from her community, or the joyous autonomy felt as she swims away with the seals, her children **'calling'** and **'waving'** at her from the land as she sets off into the distance.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'The Sealwife' concentrates a number of themes threading through *Book of Shadows*: the relationship of the human to the natural world, the interelatedness of all life forms; and 'outlawed' figures and forms of knowledge. The lost sealskin becomes in Llewellyn-Williams's poem a powerful metaphor for female desire and our inner connection to the creaturely world, which humans have sought to deny or control. Referencing the poet's interest in Renaissance science and magic, **'The Sealwife'** explores thinker Giordano Bruno's claim that 'all parts of the material universe are in continual motion and are continually renewed from within'.[5] As magical and important a covering as the seal's skin, poetic language is here linked to the endless capacity of the natural universe – and the human mind – for inner transformation and renewal.

The selkie's search for her skin parallels the poem's search for a language capable of expressing the inseparability of self and nature: the poet's arresting use of concrete images, musicality and rhyme calls attention to language's textures and materiality, and in turn, its embeddedness in the natural, fleshly world.

Llewellyn-Williams has admitted that 'I like to work with what's immediate and present, even if we're talking about the past or people and events outside the room', and her use of the first-person voice here grabs the reader with its immediacy and frankness.[6] Challenging the romantic tradition in poetry of an implicitly male speaker addressing an idealised female love object, it is the male partner who remains all but silent and absent in this account; indeed, it is the sealwife's skin, not the husband, which forms the primary object of her desire. The **'voice and eyes'** of her partner might signal shelter and belonging, but they are also figurative of a language and way of seeing that refuse to fully admit the complexity of her identity.

Caught between cultures and trying to find a voice in a language not originally her own, there are also parallels in the selkie's story with the situation of Welsh writers in English. While the sealwife admits an ambivalence of distance and connection with her family and the human, social world, what is clear is the confident way in which she controls her own narrative, judiciously giving her husband his due while asserting her right to change.

Llewellyn-Williams's rewriting of the story of the selkie has a strange beauty, but nature is never sentimentalised. What emerges is an ecofeminist protest at how human culture works to define, delimit and appropriate women and nature alike; to respect our deep involvement in the processes of the nature, the poem suggests, is also to respect women's right to an autonomy of expression and desire.

(5) Giordano Bruno, quoted in Gifford, *Green Voices*, p. 170.

(6) Hilary Llewellyn-Williams, 'About Me', https://sites.google.com/site/hilaryllewellynwilliams/about-me [Accessed 20 May 2020].

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What sort of person is the sealwife? How do we know?

How is nature presented in the poem? Pick out some interesting images.

How does the speaker feel about her life on land?

Is this poem happy or sad in outlook?

SECTION 5

(links active May 2020)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

Hilary Llewellyn-Williams
(**https://sites.google.com/site/hilaryllewellynwilliams/about-me/Hilaryw.jpg?attredirects=0**)

Photograph by Hilary Llewellyn-Williams, permission granted 1.6.20.

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Orkneyjar, *The Selkie-folk*:
orkneyjar.com/folklore/selkiefolk

Hilary Llewellyn-Williams reading her poem 'An Eye Test':
youtube.com/watch?v=yf1n5Ksejb8

The Poetry Foundation's collection of poetry addressing the natural world and ecology, with a helpful summary of the history of environmental poetry:
poetryfoundation.org/collections/146462/poetry-and-the-environment

Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Ecofeminism*:
britannica.com/topic/ecofeminism

FURTHER READING

Aaltonen, Heli. 'Selkie Stories as an Example of Ecosophical Storytelling', in Shifra Schonmann (ed.), *Key Concepts in Theatre/Drama Education* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2011), pp.153–158

Entwhistle, Alice. *Poetry, Geography, Gender: Women Rewriting Contemporary Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales. Press, 2013)

Gifford, Terry. *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995)

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

CREW

John Ormond

‘In September’

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

(page 290–1 of *Poetry 1900–2000*)

CREW

CONTENTS

3 SECTION 1 :
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

4 SECTION 2 :
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

7 SECTION 3 :
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

8 SECTION 4 :
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK

8 SECTION 5 :
PHOTOGRAPHS

9 SECTION 6 :
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

10 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.)

John Ormond was born in Dunvant, near Swansea, in 1923. The son of the village shoemaker, Ormond was not from an affluent background, but the nature of his father's trade gave him a lifelong appreciation of the value of skilled labour and artistic craftsmanship. His interest in the arts were early encouraged by his religious upbringing, attending the village's independent, Nonconformist chapel, Ebenezer. This was not the stern, strait-laced institution it appears from the outside: rather, the chapel was 'the hub of the village community, its cultural life rich even by Welsh standards: choral singing, oratorio performances, theatrical productions and discussion groups were all part of the normal calendar'.[1] Exposed at a young age to music, poetry, art and drama, Ormond developed an early ambition to be a poet. He went on to study Philosophy and English at University College, Swansea. Here he was exposed to modern philosophical ideas, and began writing. He began publishing in poetry magazines in 1941, and by 1943 had published his work in an anthology alongside two other young poets (*Indications*, with John Bayliss and James Kirkup).

In 1945, Ormond left Swansea to pursue a career as a journalist in London. Within a matter of months, he had been made staff writer at the prestigious photojournalist magazine *Picture Post*. His work at this magazine, which combined his talent for language with his passion for the visual, would prove invaluable when, in the mid-1950s, he secured a job at the BBC in Cardiff. Starting as a television news assistant, he was soon promoted to the role of documentary film producer. This was to be a new beginning of a uniquely dualistic creative career as a poet and filmmaker. By the time of his death in 1990, he had produced some 40 films and published over 200 poems.

Ormond's passion for music, the arts, and politics, alongside his appreciation of artistic craftsmanship, permeates all of his work in verse and on screen. Although his poems are often composed in a deceptively plain-speaking language – perhaps aimed, like television, at large, popular audiences – they are always meticulously crafted, and display an awareness and sensitivity to a wide range of cultural, religious and political references. The major theme of his work is the profound value and universal importance of human creativity, which, perhaps in place of the formal Christian faith he had earlier come to doubt, he afforded an almost religious significance.

(1) Rian Evans, 'An Ormond Chronology', in John Ormond, *Collected Poems* (Bridgend: Seren, 2015), p. 33.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'In September' is an anniversary poem, written for the poet's wife Glenys, whom he had married on 21 September 1946. Ormond's daughter, Rian Evans, has suggested that the poem was 'penned late on the night of the 20th September, probably 1970, because he'd forgotten to buy a card'. However, the resulting poem was 'deemed by them both to be infinitely preferable.'[2]

The significance of the title rests not only in its celebration of the poet's wedding anniversary, but also in the fact that 21 September is around the period of the autumnal equinox – when the sun aligns directly with the equator, and in the Northern Hemisphere nights begin to be longer than days, and summer becomes autumn. True to Ormond's penchant for exploring ideas and symbols from a wide range of sources, 'In September' plays with the broader symbolic resonances of the idea of the equinox – with its connotations of harmony, equality, and the equal arrangement of two halves – intricately weaving these into a poem in celebration of matrimonial love.

Form.

'In September' is a relatively succinct poem, but nevertheless rich in allusion and reference. It consists of three septets – stanzas of seven lines in length. Given the poem's theme of diurnal turnings, these can be understood to represent the seven days of the week. The three stanzas together add up to twenty-one lines, a number which also echoes the date of the poet's anniversary. Moreover, the poem is rich in Celtic and Christian symbolism, and the number three has innumerable religious and cultural significances, from the Holy Trinity of Christian theology, to popular folklore ('Goldilocks and the Three Bears', 'Three Little Pigs'), and pagan mythology. The number three carries particular significance in La Tène symbolism (for instance, the triskelion symbol). La Tène was a widespread form of pre-Roman European culture that is often associated with the development of Celtic symbolism and craft. 'In September' strongly alludes to these in its stylistic and symbolic patterns.

Although the septet form could be interpreted as a reference to the Sicilian Septet (Ormond had links with Italy and spent much time there later in life), there is no strict rhythm or end-rhyme patterning as is usual in the latter form. However, the absence of strict meter and rhyme gives the poem a certain freedom and liveliness, which fits with its theme of the continuation and renewal of love between a married couple after many years of marriage. The poem is at once intimate and universal in tone, addressed in the second person to the speaker's **'wife'**, yet at the same time an expression of the universality of love.

(2) Rian Evans, in John Ormond, *Collected Poems*, p. 283.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1–7.

Being an anniversary poem, **'In September'** is a celebration and avowal of the commitment, renewal, and continuation of marital love. Appropriately, it opens with the word **'Again'**, and emphasising this, two other lines in this stanza start with similar words: line 3 with the phrase **'once more'**, and line 5 **'Again'** (again). An anniversary is of course also the ritual marking of a year's passing, and therefore implicitly references the movement of the earth around the sun. Alluding to the broader celestial significance of this, the poem weaves pagan symbolism into this first stanza. The **'golden month'** is a reference to September being the month of the autumn equinox – soon after the harvest, a time when night begins to be longer than daylight, and leaves begin turn golden prior to the coming of winter. The key reference in English poetry is Keats' ode 'To Autumn': 'Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, / Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun'.[3] As Keats intimates, autumn is a time of natural maturity, when the birth of spring and the youth of summer have passed, and when the year is reaching its mature stage. Ormond's poem, written after many years of marriage, is similarly an expression of mature, enduring love. Equally, the **'golden month'** refers to the gold of a wedding ring, which the speaker vows **'I'd wind [...] in a ring / About your finger'**. Importantly, though the phrasing here refers to the memory of the ritual of marriage, the speaker does not adopt the past tense –'I wound [...] a ring / About your finger' – but the future tense: **'I'd'**. This fits with the poem's broader theme of the enduring nature of love, which has a past, a present and a future. Moreover, the **'ring'** has a particular symbolic significance here: not only Christian, but pagan in its reference to circularity, eternity, and visual echoes of the annual 'ring' the earth makes around the sun, all of which leads circularly back to the idea of the anniversary.

Lines 5–7.

Lines 5–7 further develop the seasonal, diurnal motifs central to the poem, but also intertwine these with Christian imagery. Here the speaker describes his love as his 'shelter, / My good roof over me, / My strong wall against winter.' These are images of the stability and strength of marital love, but moreover they relate to the biblical idea of taking refuge in God's love, as in Psalm 91: 'my refuge and my fortress, my God; in him will I trust',[4] as well as, of course, the Nativity. This also pursues the poem's theme of time's passing: though it is September, the speaker is anticipating the winter that is to come (of both the year's turning and of late life), but finds solace in the love of his partner.

(3) John Keats, 'To Autumn', *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Classics: 2003), p. 434.

(4) King James Bible, Psalm 91:2.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 8–14.
Stanza two pursues the Christian imagery, but once more blends this with symbolism connected to pagan ritual. The images of **'bread'** and **'red wine'** refer to Holy Communion, the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist, but also to the sense of plenty and abundance associated with autumn, which comes soon after harvest. The motifs here are related to the idea of shelter presented in the previous stanza: of **'fire / Upon my hearth'**; **'My true storm door'**. These are images of loving family refuge (the 'hearth and home'), safety and protection, but also physical intimacy: indeed 'fire' hints at sexuality, as does the image of **'lock'** and **'key'**. At the same time, the idea of the key in the lock fits neatly into the poem's broader symbolism of universal turnings. The final lines in this stanza intimate the continuation of physical love, with the speaker asking his wife to be the **'soft silk on my bed.'** This is an image of sensuality and physical love, although it perhaps indicates a certain inequality of gender roles, given the speaker's wife is presented as a passive provider of pleasure and comfort, and on a bed which is possessed by the speaker (**'my bed'**).

Lines 15–21.
If the second stanza's images of **'wine'**, **'fire'**, and locking doors suggest ideas of evening, shelter, and intimacy, the third stanza emerges afresh with the image of morning and its connotation of new beginnings. This is another development of the poem's broad theme of cyclical natural rhythms and renewal: where in the previous stanza the couple indulged in the fruits of the love they had harvested, this stanza suggests the possibility of continued renewal, rebirth, and abundance: **'Multiply my joy'**. Accordingly, the speaker here enumerates the multiplicity of things his partner symbolises for him. Ingeniously, and in tension with the stanza's implication of fresh renewal, these are also images of ancientness, which further interlock with the poem's presentation of the timeless universality of love: a **'rare coin'** – an image of precious value (and circularity) – and a **'Granary'**, another pagan image of shelter and safety, as a place where humans have for millennia stored grain. Grain is of course a source ingredient for bread, which again ties in with the Christian symbolism of bread in stanza two, as well as with pagan understandings of the life, growth, and sustenance gained from the earth. However, from here lines 18–20 elevate away from the grounded imagery of buried coins and grains to loftier, celestial imagery: **'my promising fair / Sky, my star, the meaning / Of my journey'** – metaphors which again overlap with the poem's central image of the earth's diurnal journey around the sun. The final lines come full circle by tying together these universal images of circularity, annual return and rebirth with the entreat to **'Be […] / My twelve months long desire'**, the poem's closing on the word 'desire' emphasising not an ending but the eternal continuation of physical and emotional love.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'In September' is an anniversary poem addressed to the speaker's wife on their wedding anniversary. It delicately weaves images, motifs and symbolic threads around the central motif of the autumn equinox, and in doing so connects the personal and intimate nature of love with its timelessness and universality. Within three short stanzas, the poem spans a vast symbolic range of temporal and physical passages, through day and night, weeks, months, seasons, years and millennia; in so doing, it also moves from the indoor to the outdoor, the earthly to the celestial. Central to the poem are the motifs of circularity and eternity, connected to the autumn equinox and the passage of time. This is symbolised in the wedding ring, but also the orbit of earth around the sun. In addition to the strong Christian overtones, the poem is shaped by Celtic and Iron Age La Tène art and symbolism, which is traditionally characterised by elegant, intricately interwoven lines, knotwork, spirals, and overlapping, repeated patterns – often in groupings of three – that have no beginning or end. This accumulation of allusions and symbolic patterns builds towards an intricate, finely wrought yet playful poem.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What images of and references to time can you find in the poem?

What references and images of circles and circularity can you find?

What religious symbolism is employed in the poem?

What kind of love is the speaker expressing?

SECTION 5

(links active May 2020)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

John Ormond
Photograph by Julian Sheppard
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http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Information on Celtic symbolism: **en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtic_knot**

Information on the Celtic triskelion: **en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triskelion**

Celtic La Tène Culture: **visual-arts-cork.com/cultural-history-of-ireland/la-tene-celtic-culture.htm#characteristics**

Information (and a short video) on equinoxes **bbc.co.uk/newsround/43474501**

Another short video on equinoxes: **youtube.com/watch?v=kaG6PTVrFP4**

FURTHER READING

Evans, Rian, ‘An Ormond Chronology’, in John Ormond, *Collected Poems* (Bridgend: Seren, 2015).

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

CREW

Owen Sheers

'Antonia's Story'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

(Page 856 of *Poetry 1900-2000*)

CREW

CONTENTS

3 SECTION 1:
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

4 SECTION 2:
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

9 SECTION 3:
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

10 SECTION 4:
FIVE QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK

10 SECTION 5:
PHOTOGRAPHS

11 SECTION 6:
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

Owen Sheers is an author, poet and playwright, who was born in Suva, Fiji, in 1974, and was brought up, from the age of nine, in the village of Llanddewi Rhydderch near Abergavenny. He read English at New College, Oxford and then went on to study an MA in Creative Writing at University of East Anglia, under the former poet laureate Andrew Motion.

In an interview with the *Wales Arts Review* in 2013, Sheers claimed to be 'interested in the concept of the writer as a conduit for other voices beyond their own; in using poetry and theatre to bridge the distances that appear to be ever widening in our society' (1).

(1) Poetry Interview: Owen Sheers', *Wales Arts Review*, 11 June 2013. Available at: http://www.walesartsreview.org/poetry-interview-owen-sheers/

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

The title '**Antonia's Story**' draws our attention to the fact that this is Antonia's recollection of events, despite the fact that an unidentified third person conveys her story. Despite the fact that Antonia does not speak directly within the poem, she is given (a perhaps questionable) priority through the inclusion of her name in the poem's title and the perspective is hers throughout. Events are mediated, however, by an unidentified speaker. The title evokes patterns of oral storytelling, which is further reinforced by the fairy-tale way that Antonia '**fell to sleep**' dreaming.

Form.

This poem is composed in free verse, while long lines make for an irregular appearance on the page. Some images and lines recur later in the poem, but these repetitions mark an irrevocable shift in experience rather than simple duplication.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Line 1.

The opening line creates a distance between the reader and Antonia through the reportage style of the phrase: '**She told me how**'. Antonia's passivity, suggested by her absent voice, is reinforced by the description of how '**she fell to sleep**'. The aggressiveness of the fists on a door and Antonia's passive resistance in falling asleep begs the question of whether she has suffered violence at the hands of the nameless man. Yet this undercurrent of violence remains ambiguous throughout the poem. The significance of auditory imagery in the poem is signalled by the word '**sound**' in the first line and as the poem progresses a number of thuds, beats, rustles, and thumps take on increasing levels of significance.

Lines 2-4.

Line 2 begins with and thus emphasises **'Dull thuds**'; the sound of fists on the door are described as if they were footsteps on the stairs, thudding up to Antonia's bedroom. The dullness of the sounds perhaps indicates that Antonia is somehow numb to such noises. The soundscape of violence transitions to one of an awareness of the body – the '**rustle of blood in her ear**' and the beat of the heart – is matched by an awareness of her bed (the pillow, the sheet). The subtext of violence is maintained. Is it the blood vessels pulsing in her ear or a rustle of shed blood? Awareness of the physical beat of a heart can suggest fear, while the word '**beat**' recalls the action of the fists on the door. A bed can be a place of rest, intimacy, love, sex, but also violence. All these possibilities are held in play, though ultimately Antonia finds some kind of rest or escape as suggested in the words: '**then sleep**'.

Lines 5-6.

These lines remind us that this is a continuation of the account Antonia had told the speaker because of the opening phrase '**Of how she**'. The introduction of a dream '**of an apple ripening, then falling a fall**' invites multiple interpretations, since dreams are widely regarded as having symbolic meaning (possibly prophetic, certainly psychological).
Apples are associated with fecundity, particularly the ripe apple falling. Eating the forbidden apple (Eve in the Garden of Eden) or a poisoned apple (in fairy stories) leads to a fall, though the apple in this poem is untasted. If the apple relates to the forbidden, perhaps Antonia's relationship with a man who is forbidden (or dangerous) is being suggested. Snow White is tempted by a ripe apple, offered by a supposedly kindly old woman; but this is an illusion for she is a witch and the apple poisonous. Is Sheers using a range of allegorical references to comment on the temptations and dangers of a volatile relationship?

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 7-8.

By line 7 the 'thuds' have become a singular '**thud**', which is '**loud**' instead of 'dull', and repeated. The volume and repetition suggests the significance of the event while the quality of the thud '**echoing in the night**' in line 7 suggesting Antonia has heard a real sound.

The use of enjambment between lines 7 and 8 connects Antonia and the man, his 'thud' and 'the beat of her heart on the sheet'. Perhaps unbeknown to her at this point, the 'thud' is symbolic of her loss and the speaker is signalling the emotional impact that this will have on her afterwards, which we see later on in the poem.

Lines 9-10.

There is a break in the use of quatrains here; the third verse is a couplet, a single sentence across two lines, both of which begin with '**and**'. The tone and pace changes markedly, the relentlessness of 'and' reminds us that this is an event that is past and immutable. The couplet is the last point in the poem when she is still unaware of the man's fall (and we understand his death). Repetition of the sound of fists marks is momentarily misunderstood as '**the persistence of love**', that is to say she thinks it the same fists as in line 1. Given the hints of violence in the first verse, the reader may wonder if 'love' is an apt word. Yet there is warmth and some lightness in this couplet signalled by the word '**surprise**' that suggests Antonia has some hope.

Lines 11-14.

These lines both dramatise and give us the 'facts' of 'Antonia's Story' (as related to the speaker). The image of the man '**lying on the lawn**' is seen from Antonia's perspective '**over the policeman's shoulder**'. The image of '**him**' looking '**so pale and quiet**' contrasts with his persistent fists at the door at the start of the poem. This image is uncanny or dreamlike in being simultaneously peaceful – he is '**lying asleep and covered in dew**' – and sinister as the reader immediately understands Antonia is seeing a lifeless body on the ground which has been there long enough and become cold enough to have collected the dew.

The pace of the poem is slowed here, conveying confusion and a congealed sense of time and experience through the use of questions in lines 13 and 14. The speaker focuses on Antonia's confused thoughts, and the questions running through her head. These thoughts and the adoption of her perspective as she sees '**him over the policeman's shoulder**', Antonia now becomes the active one in the relationship as she gazes down upon the man. Since this is 'Antonia's story' – and line 11 reminds us '**She told me how…**' – we might also question whether these were her thoughts or whether she concocts these later. Is there a possibility she is in some way culpable?

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 15-18.

These lines suggest that Antonia only knew that he had fallen when she saw '**the broken drainpipe**'. The young man, like the dreamed of apple, has fallen, '**ripe in the night**'. His ripeness may reflect that he is in the prime of life, or 'ripe' could mean 'ready', signalling his actions were bound to lead to this. The man's attempt to climb 'the broken drainpipe' could be perceived as a romantic gesture, reinforcing the aforementioned 'persistence of love' (line 10).

The Biblical allusions suggested by the apple are reinforced by the description of the drainpipe wagging like '**a madman's finger preaching in the wind**'. The use of 'preaching' suggests the delivery of a religious message; is the fall a punishment for sin? 'Fall' recalls the fall of man from grace and the expulsion from Eden. The drainpipe itself could be seen as having a serpentine shape, which – like the snake in the garden – leads to the ultimate fall. Insinuations of violence and disorder are present in this scene. The drainpipe is like a madman's finger, while the use of '**swung wild**' recalls the idiomatic 'swing for' someone (meaning to hit them). Moreover the pipe '**still**' swings, recalling the persistence or determination of the man.

Lines 19-20.

The critical events are over, and from this point on the poem focuses on the aftermath, repeating images, sounds and actions which emphasise emptiness or grief in Antonia's life. The door is again prominent: '**each night she unlocks the door**'. In the poem, it is a threshold only Antonia crosses. The choice to leave it unlocked expresses grief or regret, and reinforces a sense of loneliness. At the start of the poem the locked door prevents the man from crossing the threshold. By the end of the poem they are separated by a greater barrier than a door.

These lines are haunting in their emotional charge and more literally in the sense of being suggestive of ghosts. The door now '**gets blown, wild in the wind**', repeating the image of the 'broken drainpipe' that 'swung wild… / …in the wind'. As we associate the drainpipe with the man's death, could this be a reference to how the man haunts Antonia from beyond the grave? Is she emotionally tormented by the event?

Lines 21-22.

These lines repeat the dull and rustling sounds of the first verse but now emphasise Antonia's solitariness as she alone makes the sounds. This sense of loneliness is amplified by Sheers's use of enjambment between line 21 which ends on '**bed**' and line 22. The repetition of images and phrases creates another layer of echoes, as Antonia '**climbs to bed**' and '**falls to sleep**' (where the man climbed the drainpipe and fell to his death).

Interestingly, the '**rustle of blood in her ear**' remains unchanged from the start of the poem, the sound of blood reminding us that she is alive and perhaps that she has survived the relationship.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 23-24.

The recurring dream – a variation on the earlier dream – makes her very sleep '**dark**'. One expects to sleep in the dark, but 'dark sleep' suggests a lack of rest, of troubled dreams. Whether it is the implied violence of the relationship or regret or even guilt at the man's untimely death is open to speculation.

Lines 25-26.

There is a slight uplift of the tone in these final two lines. Antonia is still very much alive and perhaps capable of loving again, as '**the beat of her heart on the sheet**' reprises an image from earlier in the poem. The final line is richly ambiguous. The '**persistence of love**' echoes line 10, but this time it is Antonia's love not the man's. This is the first time her feelings have been mentioned directly. Is her surprise based on her ability to go on loving a man who was violent towards her? Or the depth and length of her mourning? Or both? Is this a tale of a survivor of an abusive relationship (in which case the persistence of love is troubling) or the story of a woman whose relationship ended with an untimely death for which she feels some responsibility? Given the sombre tone of the poem from the outset, violence seems to have formed at least some part of the relationship between Antonia and the man. Antonia's story relates the complex and paradoxical feelings of a woman who feels both abused and bereft.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The complex and paradoxical feelings of a woman who seems to have been in a violent relationship are conveyed with understatement and a refusal to provide resolution. Violence is implicit in the language and imagery – particularly the dull thumps of fists. Yet the poem voices Antonia's belief in 'the persistence of love', and acknowledges her grief. The poem is troubling because it does not reveal the wider facts that might allow judgement of both the man and Antonia; this air of uncertainty, of an unspoken story, contributes to the sombre feeling of the poem. There are a series of mixed emotions that are suggested throughout the poem, including relief, regret, loss, love, guilt and even shock.

The poem is structured around the fall of the man, the events leading up to this and the aftermath or grief caused by his death. The poem coheres through the use of repeated auditory imagery, repeated phrases or words which take on different tones and meaning according to their position in the poem. Like much of Sheers's poetry, this poem is interspersed with natural imagery, but here also the external and bodily sounds are important.
Eight lines of the poem begin with the word 'and', creating the impression of something that is ongoing, continuous or even everlasting, as well as possibly inevitable. Could this be suggestive of the ongoing cycles of violence within their relationship? Or, the 'persistence of love' that is spoken of by the poem's narrator? Or even, the ongoing emotional pain that is now experienced by Antonia '**each night**'?

Sleep is a prevalent motif in the poem, and it is used both literally and figuratively. It assists with the dreamy, hypnotic mood of the poem – particularly when we hear Antonia's version of how she saw the man 'lying on the lawn'. The prominence of sleep throughout the poem seems to support the idea that 'Antonia's Story' expresses a degree of guilt. Shakespeare used sleep as a motif in Macbeth to highlight Macbeth's guilt throughout the play: "Macbeth does murder sleep" (Act 2, Scene 2, Line 36). Antonia's possible culpability in the man's fall could therefore lead to a guilt that is manifested in her restless 'dark sleep'.

FIVE QUESTIONS PUPILS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

How is violence suggested by the poem? Is the evidence of violence conclusive?

What's the significance of the apple in the poem? Does it change or hold multiple meanings simultaneously?

How might the structure be important to the meaning of the poem?

How effective is the use of recurring phrases or images in the poem? How do the meanings of each recurring phrase or word change in the course of the poem? Does one meaning supersede or merely supplement or qualify the other?

Is Antonia a reliable source within the poem?

SECTION 5

(links active August 2018)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

A recent picture of Owen Sheers, taken from his website:

http://www.owensheers.co.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/owen_large_feb-15.jpg

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Owen Sheers's website:
http://www.owensheers.co.uk/

Owen's Sheers's profile on the BBC website:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/sites/owen-sheers/

British Council Literature: Owen Sheers https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/owen-sheers
Owen Sheers as a Poet in Residence at the Poetry Archive, where he talks about poetry and answers questions from members of the public:
https://www.poetryarchive.org/poet-in-residence/23185

Owen Sheers talks about the influence of his Welsh heritage on his writing, from the landscape to the lives of the small town boys he grew up with:
https://www.poetryarchive.org/interview/owen-sheers-interview

Wales Arts Review's interviews and articles on Owen Sheers:
http://www.walesartsreview.org/?s=owen+sheers

WJEC's exclusive interview with poet:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeB9zK1DtOo

Twitter link:
https://twitter.com/owensheers

All links are clickable

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CREW

R. S. Thomas 'A Marriage'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

(Page 151 of *Poetry 1900–2000*)

CREW

CONTENTS

3 SECTION 1:
BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

4 SECTION 2:
LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

9 SECTION 3:
COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

10 SECTION 4:
FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK

11 SECTION 5:
PHOTOGRAPHS

12 SECTION 6:
LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

Ronald Stuart Thomas was born in Cardiff in March 1913. The family were in Liverpool for much of World War I, but in 1918 they moved to Holyhead, Anglesey, where the young Thomas was primarily brought up. At university in Bangor, Thomas studied classics. Then he went to St Michael's College, Llandaff, in Cardiff, to be trained as an Anglican priest. During his first curacy, in Chirk on the Wales-England border (1936-40), he met the painter Mildred Elsie Eldridge ('Elsi'; 1909-91) and they were married in 1940. Elsi's artistic reputation became obscured over the course of her married life and she is now mainly remembered for the miniatures of birds and plants she produced from the late 1950s onwards. However, she was an artist of considerable achievement, and the centrepiece of her work is the large mural 'The Dance of Life', now at Glyndŵr University.

Thomas was vicar in Manafon (Montgomeryshire, 1942-54), Eglwys-Fach (near Aberystwyth, 1954-67), and finally Aberdaron (on the Llŷn Peninsula, from 1967). He retired from Aberdaron in 1978, but stayed in the area, living in the early-seventeenth-century cottage Sarn Rhiw (or Sarn Y Plas), which was austere and very cold. Elsi died in 1991, and the 1992 volume *Mass for Hard Times* was dedicated to her. The critic M. Wynn Thomas notes that in the aftermath of his wife's death R. S. Thomas 'teetered, at times, on the very brink of delusion and breakdown' (1).

Late in his life, Thomas was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature but did not win. He died in September 2000.

(A longer biography is available in the *Library of Wales* anthology *Poetry 1900-2000*, ed. Meic Stephens, pp. 135-37.)

(1) M. Wynn Thomas, 'The Poet of Sarn Rhiw', in John Barnie, ed., *Encounters with R. S.: R. S. Thomas at 100* (Swansea: The H'mm Foundation, 2013), pp. 28-35: p. 33.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.
'A Marriage' comes from R. S. Thomas's 1992 poetry collection *Mass for Hard Times*, which is dedicated to the memory of his first wife Elsi, who had died the previous year. 'A Marriage' emerges from the personal context of Thomas's mourning, and can certainly be understood as an elegy for his wife (or at least a poetic mourning of her). However, a poem is never a straightforward drawing from life, and neither the poem's speaker ('I') nor the wife in the poem itself ('she', 'her') should be seen as some sort of simple or direct representation of R. S. Thomas and Elsi themselves: both of the individuals in the poem are literary constructions, however much they may also be responses to real-life human beings. (The 'I' of the poem should thus be understood as the poem's "speaker" rather than simply the poet, R. S. Thomas himself.)

Form.
The form of the poem on the page is visually delicate, with notably short lines – the longest are just five words long and many are only three (indeed, three lines are only two words long). The visual form of the piece is bound up with the poem's presentation of the speaker's wife, who the speaker presents as being graceful as a bird (line 8), and whose life ends (at the poem's conclusion) with a breath that has the light delicacy of a feather. The poem's shape on the page is part and parcel of its engagement with these ideas.

Lines 1 - 3.
The first line emphasises *the start of the relationship* that the poem goes on to present. Notably, the line-break at the end of line 1 creates an opening statement of apparent simplicity in the brevity of the declaration **'We met'**. However, these two words are only the beginning of the sentence that then runs on into lines 2 and 3, which quickly develop the initial idea into a far more complex scenario – in words that also introduce the poem's central imagery (that of birds).

Some contexts are important here: R. S. Thomas was a keen birdwatcher, and Elsi often painted birds over the course of her artistic life. The notion of the couple meeting amidst birdsong (lines 2 and 3) draws on such elements and constructs their initial romance as a shared experience of natural pleasures: the poem associates them with the non-human world of the birds which sing around them. This is not to say that the couple literally met amidst birdsong, of course. Rather, the poem imagines their meeting through the lens of their mutual ornithological interests.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1 - 3 (continued).
However, the imagery of the birdsong here is not just a matter of personal interests; it also responds to the place of the poem's composition, with the wood behind Thomas's cottage of Sarn Rhiw being 'thronged with birds', as M. Wynn Thomas puts it (2). The birds at the poem's start thus draw from people and place across the poet's life.

The imagery of meeting under a **'shower'** of birdsong also deserves attention here. It is worth noting that the word 'shower' itself is left hanging at the end of a line, mid-sentence, so the placing of the line-break draws particular attention to it. As such, we should ask: what are the implications of this specific word? Does it offer up the birdsong as a 'shower' of refreshing rain, nourishing the young couple? Might it suggest the splendour of a meteor shower, with the birdsong functioning as a sort of celebratory, sonic fireworks? Might it even construct the birdsong as a sort of generous gift to the couple, given that the verb 'to shower' is idiomatically associated with giving (to shower someone with coins or gold)? Whilst the introduction of the motif of birds is clearly important, that motif is itself – in these opening lines – filtered through the particular notion of a 'shower' of the birds' songs.

Lines 4 - 7.
These lines are crucially about time and our experience of it. A full half-century flashes past in line 4 – the minimal space of the three-word line reducing the greater part of a human lifetime to a short breath. This is emphasised again in line 5, which refers to that half-century as nothing more than a moment, the briefest of spaces in which love has existed. Love, the poem therefore suggests, is fleeting. But it is fleeting not because it is lost quickly, or because these two people give up on it (they don't); it is fleeting because – as lines 6 and 7 state plainly – the entire world is subject to time. Specifically, in the poem's imagery, the world is **'in / servitude'** to its temporal existence. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* explains, 'servitude' is 'The condition of being a slave or a serf, or of being the property of another person'; it is the 'absence of personal freedom'. The poem's lovers, then, just as much as the world itself, are in thrall to the powers of time: however optimistic lines 1-3 were, lines 4-7 are contrastingly tough-minded. Love itself is the prisoner of time.

(2) M. Wynn Thomas, 'The Poet of Sarn Rhiw', p. 32.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 8 - 11.
The next four lines continue to explore the same ideas as lines 4-7, except that they do so through different imagery. Here, in the seemingly romantic moment of a kiss made with closed eyes, the poet's beloved is transformed from youth to wrinkled age. But this is less nightmare than it is tragedy: the poem again makes time fly by at a rate that we do not literally experience, and love's existence seems to endure for just the briefest moment of time. In thrall to time, love seems to last for no time at all. Indeed, the poem's line-breaks help to emphasise the limited nature of the time for which love can last: the phrase 'love's moment' takes up just one line, and is bracketed by the white space of the poem's edges either side.

Working with so few words, the poem is economical in its use of language throughout. But here we find a particular moment of compression: the poem's speaker opens his eyes on his beloved's 'wrinkles'. The wrinkles here stand in for the whole of the now-aged woman: they are strictly an example of synecdoche (where a part of something is made to stand for the whole, or vice versa). But more important than the technical term is the way in which, to retain its sparse formal character, the poem relies on the one word **'wrinkles'** to imply the entire aging process.

Lines 12 - 15.
A new motif is introduced in these lines – the idea of a dance of death: a person's last dance, where the dying person (here, the wife) is partnered for the dance with death itself (3). It is interesting, however, that whilst earlier moments in the poem have been tough-minded – the presentation of love as a prisoner of time, for example – these lines are rather gentle. Death is clear but not unkind: the impossible-to-refuse invitation to the speaker's beloved is a very simple bidding ('**Come**'), rather than the violent words of a struggle. And although the beloved has no choice in the matter – it is death who does the choosing of a partner – the grim time of a long final illness (which the real-life Elsi had suffered) is not shown in its unpleasant detail. Rather, the poem imagines it in the elegant cultural form of a dance with a partner.

After the poem has looked time and its ravages so firmly in the eye, does it fail to do likewise when faced with death itself? There is an argument to be made that this is indeed the case. After all, this is not a feverish, agonised 'dance of death'. Rather, what is presented here conjures up images of polite society dancing. The poem perhaps cloaks death in the suggestion of elegance.

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(3) The literary critic Tony Brown has written that 'The poem picks up the dance of death motif which recurs in *The Echoes Return Slow* [published 1988], written in Elsi's last long illness': Tony Brown, *R. S. Thomas*, Writers of Wales (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), p. 104.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 15 - 18.

These lines return us to the imagery of birds that was established at the start of the poem. However, rather than merely using birds to provide something that remains external to the poem's protagonists – in the sense that the birdsong was something that *happened to* the lovers in lines 1-3 – here, by contrast, the speaker's beloved takes on bird-like qualities herself. This shows thematic progression over the course of the poem: the imagery of birds starts the poem in one form but by here it has evolved. By this point, the poem's '**she**' is not just amidst birdsong; here, her entire life ('**everything**') is itself the manifestation of '**a bird's grace**'. She has become *like a bird.*

As with the dance of death, birdlife here appears as elegant – strictly, in the poem's choice of words, something with **'grace'**. R. S. Thomas the keen birdwatcher is strikingly evident in this figuration: for a human to show what the poem's speaker thinks are the qualities of a bird is a high compliment. Indeed, this may even suggest that, for Thomas, birds are effectively a higher form of life than humans. As M. Wynn Thomas writes, at Sarn Rhiw Thomas could 'keep intimate company with the bird life that [...] had long solaced him for the shortcomings of humanity at large' (4). Within this poem, in other words, to equate a human being with birds is not to reduce humanity – it is to elevate it.

Lines 19 - 22.

Over these concluding lines of the poem, the imagery of birds completes its development: here, the poem's dying '**she**' does not just take on bird-like qualities; instead, in line 19, she is pictured as having a '**bill**' (beak) herself. Effectively, the transition to *becoming* a bird is complete. The critic S. J. Perry writes that, in his poetry, Thomas often 'associates his wife with the fragile creatures she so often studied and painted'. Indeed, Perry even finds a literary source for such associations in the poetry of Thomas Hardy – to which Elsi had apparently introduced her husband. Specifically, Perry points to the Hardy poem 'At the Word "Farewell"' (published in 1917), which associates his wife with 'a bird from a cloud' (5). So, through the association of birds with a beloved woman, this poem of R. S. Thomas's is also in "intertextual" dialogue with a poem of Thomas Hardy's, published seventy-five years earlier.

(4) M. Wynn Thomas, 'The Poet of Sarn Rhiw', p. 33.
(5) S. J. Perry, *Chameleon Poet: R. S. Thomas & the Literary Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 272.

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

R. S. Thomas's early poetry was particularly known for its engagement with the hill-farming communities of mid-Wales where he lived. 'A Marriage', however, is from his later period (which dates broadly from the time he moved to Aberdaron in 1967) and shows his increasing engagement with very basic human questions: here, specifically, time, love and death. Indeed, the critic M. Wynn Thomas groups 'A Marriage' with R. S. Thomas's poems that respond to his family and that 'contribute, and indeed participate in, [his ...] exploration of the mystery of being' (6).

However, the poem cannot be reduced to just these ideas: they cannot be divorced from its specific way of engaging with them and presenting them. Thus, for example, these ideas are bound up with the delicate elegance of the poem's form on the page (note how death is itself almost delicate in the final lines), and with the way that the poem consistently binds together human and avian life. In this latter sense, 'A Marriage' is not just simply an elegy for Elsi; instead, it is a poem that also mourns the shared experiences of the poet and his wife – their shared interest in birds. In this sense, it is an elegy for shared life, for a relationship.

The poem's language is generally simple, or "conversational", giving the impression – on an initial level – of a straightforward, heart-felt statement by the poem's speaker. However, note that not all the poem's words can be classed in this way: 'shower' is complicated in the sense of being somewhat ambiguous (as discussed above); 'servitude' is not conversational in register; 'bill' is a rather less common word for 'beak'; and the word 'grace' is well worth pausing over, given that R. S. Thomas was a vicar – and 'grace' has a specific meaning within Christian thinking (the notion of God's freely-given generosity to humanity, particularly expressed through salvation from sin and death). Thus, the phrase 'a bird's grace' may well refer primarily to ideas of delicate elegance; but it also has an undertow of meaning that points to a sort of salvation – a higher spiritual state that the phrase associates with birds (and, by extension, with the poem's bird-like 'she'). The poem, in short, is not without sophistication on the level of language – alerting readers to the point that it is very much a literary construction, not merely an outpouring of feeling.

The critic M. Wynn Thomas points out that 'A Marriage' is just one of a group of poems about his wife that R. S. Thomas wrote over the course of his poetic career (7). So the borders of this poem do not stop at the edges of the page; instead, they are in "intertextual" dialogue with other poems that Thomas wrote over many years.

(6) M. Wynn Thomas, *R. S. Thomas: Serial Obsessive* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), pp. 144-5. For a collection of poems by Thomas to his first wife, see R. S. Thomas, *Poems to Elsi*, ed. by Damian Walford Davies (Bridgend: Seren, 2013).
(7) M. Wynn Thomas, *R. S. Thomas: Serial Obsessive*, pp. 143-4.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

How important to the poem is the imagery of birds?

How simple or complicated is the language that the poem uses?

How does the appearance of the poem on the page play a part in the poem’s meaning?

Is this mainly a poem of mourning about one specific person, or is it more about exploring big ideas such as death, time and love?

PHOTOGRAPHS

- **https://howardbarlow.photoshelter.com/image/I0000qbVLYo7jG9k**

- **https://howardbarlow.photoshelter.com/image/I0000itqif7XYbRw**

Taken in the last decade of Thomas's life by Howard Barlow, two famous photographs of Thomas present him as an austere, gaunt individual, whose severe existence stood apart from the modern world.

This was imagery that was also bound up with the idea of Thomas the fierce Welsh nationalist, living in the remote landscapes of the far west – an individual who notably refused to engage with English-speaking tourists during his time in Aberdaron. Of course, such photographs do not present the whole picture; as we can see, the poem 'A Marriage' suggests a much gentler side to the poet's character.

- **https://www.walesonline.co.uk/lifestyle/showbiz/mildred-elsie-eldridge-celebrating-woman-2513949**

This article from WalesOnline includes a photograph of Thomas's wife Elsi, in her youth.

R. S. Thomas and Elsi on their wedding day (July 1940, Bala)

R. S. Thomas on the day of his marriage to Elsi (July 1940, Bala)

A studio picture of Elsi Eldridge taken in the 1930s, at about the time she and R. S. Thomas met (c. 1937)

Links active June 2018

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

An essay on Thomas's life and work is provided by an American organisation called the Poetry Foundation, and is a very useful complement to this help-sheet. At the end of the essay you will find: (a) links to a selection of R. S. Thomas poems that are available online; and (b) a substantial bibliography. A link at the side of the page provides access to an array of other materials on poets from Wales:
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/r-s-thomas

A simple summary of Thomas's life and career is provided on the BBC website:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/sites/rs-thomas/

A short extract from the television programme *Bookmark*, broadcast in 1995, is available on YouTube, filmed in the aftermath of Thomas's nomination for the Nobel Prize in Literature (which he did not win):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8v-uc-DI7g

A 45-minute BBC radio programme on Thomas by Welsh author Jon Gower is available, which focuses on Thomas's lifelong engagement with birdwatching and the impact this had on his poetry:
https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01r5n6g

Scholarly essays on Thomas and a substantial bibliography are available via the website of the R. S. Thomas Research Centre, Bangor University:
http://rsthomas.bangor.ac.uk/research.php.en
http://rsthomas.bangor.ac.uk/bibl.php.en

All links are clickable

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