

WJEC GCSE in English Literature for Wales:

Resources for Teachers

Welcome! These pages provide detailed readings of the 15 poems selected by the WJEC for the 2020 GCSE in English Literature component on Welsh Writing in English. You will find detailed discussions of each of the set poems, along with some pictures and links.

Each help-sheet can be read online or the full help-sheet can be downloaded as a PDF.

These readings are aimed at teachers doing the background reading in preparation for teaching, but can be viewed and used by anyone.

Digital versions available at: <https://www.swansea.ac.uk/crew/gcse-resources/>

NB: These resources are not endorsed by the WJEC and are not intended to replace any of the teaching resources created by the WJEC. Teachers notes and resources created by WJEC are available here.

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Jugged Hare **Jean Earle**

Antonia's Story **Owen Sheers**

A True Story **Owen Sheers**

Eclipse **Owen Sheers**

A Marriage **R.S. Thomas**

Advice on Adultery **Gwyneth Lewis**

From His Coy Mistress **Deryn Rees-Jones**

Goodbye **Alun Lewis**

Toast **Sheenagh Pugh**

Wild Cherry **Nigel Jenkins**

Epithalamion **Dannie Abse**

Not Adlestrop **Dannie Abse**

My Box **Gillian Clarke**

The Bride Chest **Eiluned Lewis**

Ships' Sirens **Eiluned Lewis**

Jean Earle

'Juggged Hare'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

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'?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5 (links active August 2018)

All links are clickable

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

**PROFESSOR ALICE
ENTWISTLE**

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Owen Sheers

'Antonia's Story'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

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=zeB9zKIDtOo>

Twitter link:

<https://twitter.com/owensheers>

All links are clickable



**DR SELINA
PHILPIN**

*Cardiff Metropolitan 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.

Owen Sheers

'A True Story'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

Owen Sheers was born in Fiji in 1974, but was brought up near Abergavenny where he lived and attended school before gaining a place to study at the University of Oxford. Sheers is a prolific and highly successful writer and broadcaster and is also Professor of Creativity at Swansea University.

Sheers' first collection of poetry, *The Blue Book*, was published in 2000 and included poems which explored the themes of love, childhood, family and rural life. His second poetry collection, *Skirrid Hill*, was published in 2005. Sheers is also the author of a number of prose works, including the non-fiction narrative, *The Dust Diaries* (2004), the prize-winning novels *Resistance* (2007) and *I Saw a Man* (2015), the novella *White Ravens* (2009) and the immersive theatre production *Mametz* (2014). In addition, Sheers has worked on a number of film, radio and theatre scripts and has also worked as a writer in residence for the Welsh Rugby Union.

In interviews Owen Sheers has acknowledged the influence other Welsh writers have had on his work, including R. S. Thomas, whom he credits with having 'introduced me to the beauty of economy' (1).

(1) Owen Sheers, 'How R. S. Thomas Inspired Me', The Telegraph, 2012, available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/hay-festival/9301218/Hay-Festival-2012-Owen-Sheers-how-RS-Thomas-inspired-me.html>

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'A True Story' was included in Owen Sheers' first collection of poetry, *The Blue Book*. The poem differs from a number of the other poems in the collection in that it focuses on telling a personal story and draws very little on external images. Instead, the poem offers an insight into an intimate relationship between two people. Consequently, the title has an ambiguous edge; the 'true story' could be that of the events which unfold between the two people in the poem, but could also refer to the apparent meaning of the Japanese symbol that is tattooed on the woman's back.

Form.

The poem has an even appearance on the page, comprising three balanced stanzas, each made up of five lines. 'A True Story' has a narrative tone, matching its title and subject matter, but uses direct address which creates a very personal, intimate feel within the poem.

Lines 1 - 5.

The poem opens confidently with the assertion that the subject, addressed directly, has 'the truth' tattooed on her back. This assured start is somewhat undermined by the next four lines, in which the speaker reveals that he does not actually know the meaning of the tattoo, but has been told what it means by the other person. The speaker addresses her directly, describing the tattoo's location and the way it looks like '**a spider pretending to be dead**' (line 5). The image of the spider is significant as the comparison presents the tattoo as something which has somehow ended up on the woman's shoulder and yet does not entirely belong there. Moreover, this comparison to a spider is also an early indication that the tattoo may be something unwelcome, an idea supported by the fact that the spider is pretending to be dead – perhaps representing a problem or difficulty in the relationship which lies dormant, but could flare up at any moment.

Lines 6-10.

These lines continue to develop the theme of uncertainty which was established in the previous stanza, with the speaker describing the tattoo as sometimes looking '**like a mistake**' (line 6). The fact that the tattoo is only partly hidden by the dress the woman wears suggests that it cannot be entirely concealed and, perhaps, the woman does not want to do so. The question of whether this partial concealment makes the tattoo a half-truth remains unanswered, with the question left hanging in the middle of the stanza, separating two opposing interpretations of the tattoo. In lines 6 and 7 the tattoo is described as something which, although possibly a mistake, is playful and intimate. In contrast, in lines 9 and 10 the tattoo has become '**a white lie**' (line 9), something potentially dangerous and unreliable.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 6 - 10 (continued).

This section of the poem has a more sensual feel than the earlier lines, with the tattoo partially concealed by clothing and the 'white lie' (line 9) on the subject's shoulder **'ready to whisper into your ear'** (line 10). Interestingly, the tattoo is depicted as being ready to whisper into the woman's ear, a description that has the effect of transforming the tattoo into something clandestine which cannot be relied upon. This description also aligns the tattoo and the woman as a unit, sharing a secret which the speaker is not privy to.

Lines 11-15.

There is a further change of tone in lines 11-13 as the speaker recounts an occasion where the tattoo becomes symbolic of an unresolved argument between the pair. The rhythm of the poem slows down here, with the use of commas after **'Once'** (line 11) and **'argued'** (line 11) enforcing a pause in the speaker's account of this final scene. Building further on this slower pace is an air of mystery generated by the unexplained elements of this stanza; as readers we know that the couple have argued, but we are not told why, or what the subject of the argument was. The fact that we are told few details about the argument is interesting, as we get a taste of the speaker's sense of frustration at not being able to fully understand the meaning of the tattoo. We do, however, gain an insight into the relationship between the speaker and the addressee as he accuses her of having **'played dumb all day'** (line 12), presumably in an attempt to annoy him.

The poem's ending, with the speaker lying in bed looking at the tattoo on the shoulder of his partner and realising that they must **'face the truth'** (line 14) is poignant, as it emphasises the importance of non-verbal communication between the pair. The argument which is briefly mentioned at the start of this stanza becomes crucial in an indistinct way here, prompting the speaker to focus on the tattoo. In the wake of the argument, the speaker's previous playfulness is replaced by a sense of frustration or sadness as he freely admits that the artwork is **'in a language I will never understand'** (line 15). In contrast to earlier in the poem, this final line is one of resignation, with the speaker accepting that he lacks the ability to interpret the tattoo and will have to rely solely on his partner's ambiguous statement of its meaning. This resignation can be read as a metaphor for the speaker's inability to fully understand his partner and returns to the idea that the tattoo represents a secret, problem or riddle which exists between the couple. The ending is not entirely satisfactory to the reader as we are left with a series of unanswered questions, including what the tattoo really means, why the speaker seems to dislike it and why the couple have argued. Faced with these unanswered questions we may empathise with the speaker's frustration as he accepts that the tattoo is in a language he will 'never understand' (line 15). Is it the woman herself who is the enigma?

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

As mentioned above, at a glance this poem may seem very different from many of the other poems in *The Blue Book* collection. 'A True Story' focuses on something very personal and makes no reference to the environment, landscape or rural world which feature quite prominently in many of the other poems in the collection. Yet there are some shared themes which connect this poem to Sheers' other works. The concept of storytelling recurs on a number of occasions throughout *The Blue Book*, with several other poems, including 'Antonia's Story' and 'Not Yet My Mother', exploring ideas of personal identity through the recounting of an individual's story. The exploration of language as a barrier creating a divide between the couple in the poem also connects 'A True Story' to wider discussions of identity and borders which exist within the collection.

To consider the poem as merely an individual narrative would, however, be reductive. The tattoo described in 'A True Story' has a complex meaning, becoming as it does symbolic of an unwanted truth which exists between the couple in the poem. For the speaker, the tattoo appears to symbolise a different time in his partner's life and its origin may lie in a story from before their relationship began. Consequently, the description of the tattoo as a 'spider' is used to indicate something which, like the truth, is sometimes unwanted and which may also be feared. This theme is continued throughout the poem, with the speaker only fully considering the tattoo, and the truth that it represents, when he is forced to do so by his partner turning her back on him.

Moreover, the tattoo has become a barrier between the couple, both in terms of its meaning and because, symbolically and linguistically, it has come to represent something which the speaker cannot understand. In the final lines the speaker feels shut out by the tattoo as it has become an object which lies between him and his partner. The sense of hurt and frustration experienced by the poet here may well be inspired by Sheers' own fascination with languages which he does not personally speak; a nod to his childhood in Wales, a nation with its own complex linguistic history. The image almost seems to taunt the speaker, with its image appearing, slyly, half-hidden by the addressee's clothing, but visible enough to remind him that it is still there. Here, the poet seems hurt as he is able to understand the meaning of the tattoo and what it represents, without actually understanding the language in which it is written, emphasising his sense of being an outsider. As a result, the tattoo becomes a symbol of power; the woman uses the tattoo to exert an element of power in the poem, allowing it to remain partially visible when she dresses and turning it towards him following the argument. Whether the woman does these things intentionally or subconsciously is not made clear in the poem and remains another unanswered question. The poem ends with the sense that the woman, and the tattoo on her back, has a personal history which the speaker will never be able to fully understand.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Why does the woman in this poem have no voice?

Why does the speaker seem so frustrated by the fact that he cannot understand the meaning of the tattoo?

Why does the speaker compare the tattoo to a spider?

What does the poem have to say about identity?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5
(links active June 2018)
All links are clickable

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

• <https://www.japanese-symbols.org/japanese-symbols-kanji/真実-Truth>

The first image is a portrait of Owen Sheers, taken around 2015.

The second image is of some of the most widely used Japanese symbols which mean 'truth'. While we do not know which, if any, of these the poem is referring to, they provide an example of the type of image being discussed in the poem.

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

A profile of Owen Sheers is available on the BBC website, providing a summary of his background and key publications up to 2011:

www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/sites/owen-sheers/

A WJEC interview with Owen Sheers, discussing identity, where he finds his inspiration for his work and how he approaches the writing process:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeB9zKIDtOo>

An interview with Sheers in which he discusses the influence of other Welsh writers on his work:

<https://www.poetryarchive.org/interview/owen-sheers-interview>

An interesting profile piece published in *The Independent* in 2011 in which Sheers discusses the importance of truth-telling in writing and how this is what he aspires to achieve through his poetry:

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/a-writer-whos-hard-to-resist-6267092.html>

All links are clickable



**DR EMMA
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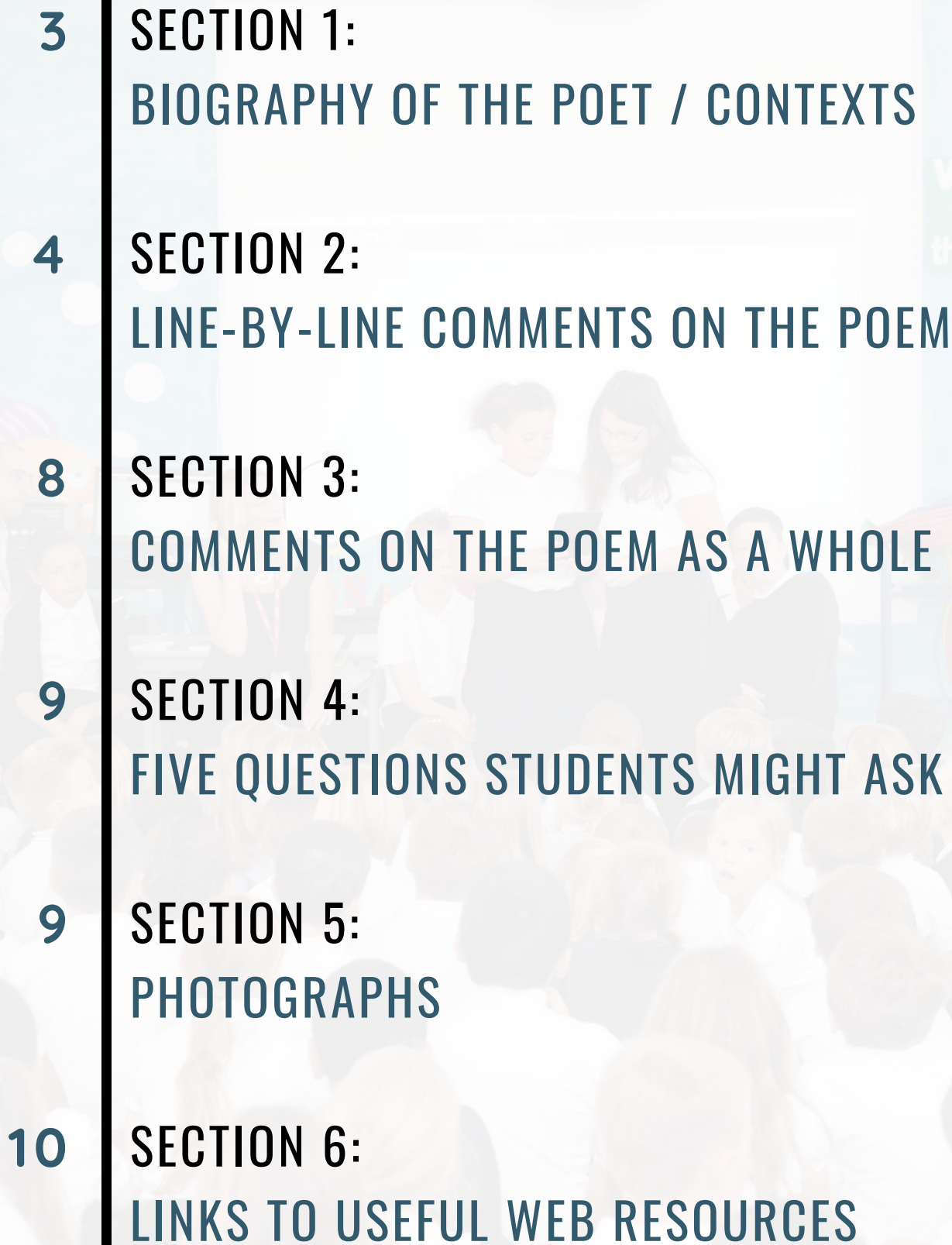
Cardiff University
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Owen Sheers

'Eclipse'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

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. Sheers has published two poetry collections, *The Blue Book* in 2000 and *Skirrid Hill* in 2005. The former title is a reference to government papers that were published in 1847 to report on the state of education in Wales; the latter makes reference to the landscape of the Black Mountains where Sheers grew up. Having been shortlisted for the Wales Book of the Year award for *The Blue Book* in 2000, Sheers went on to win the award in 2005 for his debut prose work *The Dust Diaries* (2004).

In 2009, Sheers published *A Poet’s Guide to Britain* following a six-part series about poetry and the landscape that he had written and presented for BBC 4. This anthology highlighted the relationship between poetry and place, mirroring the emphasis that Sheers puts on place within his own works, particularly when he writes about the Welsh landscape as he often does in his earlier poetry.

Sheers’s work has examined Welsh society, culture, and history, yet he describes himself ‘as a writer from Wales, rather than being a Welsh writer’.[1] In 2012, he was appointed as the Welsh Rugby Union’s first writer in residence, following which he published *Calon: A Journey to the Heart of Welsh Rugby*. Combining writing and rugby, Sheers described the role as his ‘perfect job’[2] – he was himself a former scrum half for Gwent County. In 2016 he wrote *The Green Hollow*, a ‘film-poem’ commemorating the 50th anniversary of the 1966 Aberfan disaster.

Sheers is currently Professor of Creativity at Swansea University.

(1) ‘Owen Sheers Interview’, *Poetry Archive* [online]. Available at:

<https://www.poetryarchive.org/interview/owen-sheers-interview> (Accessed 28 August 2018).

(2) ‘WRU’s artist in residence Owen Sheers talks of his “dream job”’, *WalesOnline*, 11 February 2012. Available at:

<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/lifestyle/showbiz/wrus-artist-residence-owen-sheers-2035770> (Accessed 28 August 2018).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'Eclipse' comes from Owen Sheers's debut poetry collection *The Blue Book* (2000), and the title is ambiguous both in terms of content and grammar. We do not know whether this is the noun eclipse, which refers to the natural phenomenon, or the verb eclipse, gesturing to something (a person? A relationship?) that has been overshadowed. However, the imagery of dark and light is immediately evoked, both literally and figuratively - in terms of the 'monochrome' effect of a natural eclipse and idiomatically as in 'being kept in the dark' or 'seeing the light'.

Upon reading the poem, we learn that Sheers is using both forms of 'eclipse'. The poem dramatises the speaker's realisation that (he?) has been usurped by a new lover. This realisation mirrors the gradual movement of the natural eclipse that is being witnessed throughout the poem. One is not supposed to look directly at an eclipse, so the metaphor effectively suggests the speaker's inability (or refusal?) at the beginning of the poem to accept that the relationship is over. Like facing the eclipse, it is difficult for him to face the truth.

Form.

The poem is structured as a series of seven couplets and a final one-lined stanza, emphasising the transition of the speaker from a state of togetherness to separation. Sheers uses a series of end-stopped lines throughout the poem, except for stanza 4 where the full eclipse occurs and the speaker realises that there is something '**between us**' (line 8). The full stop marks a break between the two halves of the poem. Meanwhile, the slow pace or rhythm of the poem reflects the slow movement of the eclipse and the long time it takes the speaker to understand that the relationship is over.

Lines 1-4.

The opening lines establish the divided physical locations of the speaker in the countryside and the addressee in the city. There is the suggestion of a couple that have been together but who are now separate: '**We watched it apart**'. This main clause begins with the first person plural 'We' to open the poem, suggesting a sense of togetherness. However, this is revoked with the speaker's use of the adverb '**apart**', indicating a separation. The couple are physically apart, but at this stage this separation could be temporary as we don't know the relationship has (already?) ended.

The use of anaphora (the use of a word referring back to a word used earlier in a text) in the opening line through the pronoun 'it' means that the reader refers back to the title for meaning, and we understand that the speaker is referring to a natural eclipse.[3] The 'it' then becomes the '**half-darkness**', and we see a transition from 'it' simply referring to the natural eclipse to something else. Could 'it' be referring to another man? This is because the 'half-darkness fall[s] over' her, which could be a reference to the idiom 'to fall for someone'. It could even refer to the shadow another person cast over her in the moonlight.

(3) There was a rare and widely viewed solar eclipse visible from Britain in August 1999 (it was a total eclipse when viewed from the south-west coast of England).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-4 (continued).

We learn that something could be awry in the couple's relationship, as the speaker ponders whether it was **'my mistake'** to watch the eclipse separately. The phrase is suggestive of regret but later we wonder if it was already too late. The act of viewing the eclipse (together or apart) suggests the idea of (different) perspectives or points of view and hints at a fractured relationship.

The alignment of 'half-darkness' with **'the city'** in the opening stanza and the freedom of the **'flying'** rooks in the second stanza, a pastoral image, sets up a contrast between city and country, the geographical separation echoing the division between speaker and addressee. But although they are in separate places, both the speaker and the addressee seem to be connected by the eclipse – demonstrating an interconnectedness between humanity and nature that the poem explores throughout.

The reference to a **'spreading hand'** also suggests a spreading apart of the couple. Furthermore, this 'spreading hand' could be perceived as a metaphor for the spread of darkness across the fields. A spread-out hand could equally be seen as a gesture to stop or to stay away. Thus the darkness, with its connotations of secrecy (or idiomatically, 'being in the dark'), signifies the end of the relationship because the addressee has moved on to someone else – perhaps unbeknown to the speaker at this point.

The number three, or tripling, is suggested by the eclipse itself, due to it being an alignment of the sun, the moon and the earth. Invoking the number three could also refer to the love triangle that is present in the poem. Here, this tripling is made explicit through the rooks in these lines, whose typically 'greyish-white face[s]'^[4] also enhance the dark and light imagery that is prominent throughout the poem.

Lines 5-8.

These lines describe the moment of the eclipse in which earth, moon and sun are aligned, which seems to give the speaker some hope that the couple could be together again. However, as the eclipse passes, hope is confronted by the speaker's awareness that the relationship may be over, reinforced by the full stop at the end of line eight after the word **'us'**, grammatically putting an end to their relationship.

The use of the conjunction **'But'** also indicates a shift in the mindset of the speaker. This shift moves away from the togetherness that he had hoped for and the separateness that is a reality towards the gradual realisation that there is something **'between us'**. It is an ironic statement: 'something between us' means a relationship beyond friendship, but here it is also an allusion to the 'shadow' of the third party who has come between them.

In these lines the speaker imagines the former lovers together or **'connected again'**, which could be an effect of the eclipse. The fact that a solar eclipse gives the impression of night when it is day might allude metaphorically to the speaker being under a misapprehension concerning the relationship.

[4] RSPB Bird A-Z, 'Rook' [online]. Available at: <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/rook/> (Accessed 28 November 2018).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 5-8 (continued).

Of course, another interpretation is that the sight of the eclipse has **'unlocked'** a memory in him, which is reinforced by the romantic image of the moon **'passing over'** them. Is he thinking about a time when they were together in the moonlight, and this image has been ignited by the eclipse? The idea that he is reflecting on a memory is enhanced through Sheers's use of alliteration – the alliterative 'm' in these lines slows the pace as the moon and earth move in direct alignment with the sun, and the intrusive 'breeze' enters the scene almost like an awakening. This gentle wind has a calming effect on the speaker as he comes to realise that all is not what it seems.

The paradoxical **'mid-day midnight'** where the eclipse makes it look like night time even though it is day could again suggest the diametrically opposed positions of the speaker and the addressee towards the relationship – with the speaker still pining after the relationship and the addressee knowing that it is over.

A line break occurs between lines seven and eight at the point where the eclipse is at its peak. This opening up of the lines creates a sense of exposure. Has he been exposed to the truth? Is he now seeing their relationship from a different perspective? The use of enjambment between lines 7 and 8 also highlights the fact that the solar eclipse is in full alignment, because it connects the 'day' (representing sunlight) in line 7, with both the moon and the couple or 'us' (who are on earth) in line 8. It also quickens the pace. Like the eclipse, perhaps the relationship was a short affair that came and went suddenly? Or, could it be alluding to the speed that it took the addressee to move on to someone else?

Lines 9-10.

From these lines onwards to the end of the poem, the focus is on the speaker's and addressee's cooling relationship and the presence of the other man. The eclipse, like their relationship, is now in the past. A rhyming couplet is used in this stanza. Could Sheers be trying to replicate the switching on of a lightbulb, as a metaphor for the speaker's realisation, reinforced by the fact that the rhyme is **'light'** and **'night'**? This could signal a moment of sudden realisation, or it could mean that light has been shed on the truth and he is no longer in the dark, as he was during the eclipse when he recalled the memory of them together. All is not what it seems in an eclipse, where day becomes night, and this uncertainty is transferred to the status of the relationship.

Lines 11-12.

In these lines the speaker explicitly refers to the other man. Following on from his discovery after he **'learnt'** (that the relationship is actually over) in the previous stanza, the 'half-darkness' (line 2) or the 'shadow' (line 8) has now become **'his'**. With the involvement of a third person the speaker has now become eclipsed, like the sun when the moon moves in between it and the earth.

The speaker recognises the **'cooled'** tone in the addressee's voice now that she has another person in her life. There is a distance between them, both literally, since they are speaking on the phone, and metaphorically as her language shortens or becomes **'clipped'**. Is she being careful about what she says on the phone in the presence of her new lover? Or is she now emotionally detached from the speaker and has nothing more to say? The fact that her voice becomes 'eclipsed' indicates that she is moving into the speaker's past.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 13-14.

These lines describe how the discovery that the addressee is with another man has affected the speaker. The fact he refers to **'the dream'** with the definite article signals that he has the same image in his head before going to sleep each night: that of the addressee with the other man.

Sheers once again uses a fronted conjunction (a conjunction positioned at the beginning of a sentence) in line 13 to show the after-effects that coming to terms with the ending of this relationship is having on the speaker. Instead of remembering himself with his former lover, as he did during the eclipse, his vision is now dominated by the image of her and the other man together. This vision is quite intimate and has sexual connotations; the woman's **'up-looking face'** suggests that she is lying on her back, which has been overshadowed by **'his shadow'**. The parenthetical dashes indicate the fixedness of the speaker on this vision, and emphasise how it dominates his thoughts. They also indicate a pause, which may represent the speaker's inability to move forward. The reference to **'falling'**, which is repeated in line 15, could link back to the **'fall over you'** in the opening stanza, strengthening the idea that the opening 'half-darkness' is actually symbolic of the other man.

Line 15.

The repetition of 'his shadow' in the final line makes this the dominant image at the close of the poem. The speaker is, arguably, eclipsed. Though the final line also begins with **'his'** and ends with **'me'**, it is in the passive voice, reflecting the prominence of each man in the addressee's life. The fact that the poem begins with the first person plural, 'we', and then ends with the first person singular, 'me' symbolises the status of the speaker (once part of a couple and now alone). The solitary image of the speaker is also reflected in this the fact this is the only one-lined stanza in the entire poem.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

Sheers establishes the notion of togetherness and separation through the metaphor and image of the eclipse, focusing on its gradual movement, its dark and light colouring, and its process. The theme of relationships, specifically the loss of a relationship, is pertinent when reading this poem. The poem highlights the one-sidedness of relationships when one party moves on and the other struggles to come to terms with its having ended.

Whilst the loss of a relationship may be significant, perhaps the contemplative or meditative potential within the natural world, and how it can help us to reflect on our own lives, is important too. Sheers connects the speaker with the addressee through nature (the eclipse) to showcase how they were once connected. However, he uses the same image to demonstrate how the speaker comes to realise that the relationship is over.

The interconnectedness of humanity and the natural world is commonplace in Sheers's poetry. In another of his poems from *The Blue Book*, titled 'The Pond', Sheers writes about how he takes 'things' to the pond, such as his 'grandfather's death', his 'first kiss', or his 'arguments', [5] presumably to think these things through. Thus, the notion that nature is a tool for human contemplation is worth exploring in 'Eclipse'. This interconnectedness is shown by how, though we can be miles apart physically, we are always looking at the same sun/moon and it is this which connects us to each other, even if we are looking at it from a different perspective.

Tripling is important in this poem, although it is not immediately clear why. We are first introduced to it via the eclipse, which is an alignment of the sun, the earth and the moon. As we later discover, through the references to 'mid-day' (line 7) and '**the moon's shadow**' (line 8), the poet is referring to a solar eclipse. This means that the moon is between the sun and the earth. However, we realise the significance of tripling by the end of the poem: to convey a love triangle.

Sheers may have used an eclipse because it is a rare natural phenomenon, and this successfully conveys the effect that the relationship had on the speaker; it was special, perhaps even a rare experience. Maybe the speaker feels like it will be a long time before he feels like that again.

(5) Owen Sheers, 'The Pond', in *The Blue Book*, p. 22, l. 1, l. 4, l. 7 and l. 10.

FIVE QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What does the figure of the eclipse make you think of?

Aside from the eclipse, what is the most dominant image in the poem and why?

How important to the poem is the imagery of light and darkness?

Why might the poem be structured as it is? Consider the couplet, the line break in stanza 4 and final solitary line?

How does this poem show the relationship between humanity and the natural world?

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

A range of images taken of the solar eclipse in South Wales in 2015:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-31971509>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

What is an eclipse?

<https://www.nasa.gov/audience/forstudents/5-8/features/nasa-knows/what-is-an-eclipse-58>

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=zeB9zK1DfOo>

Twitter link:

<https://twitter.com/owensheers>



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R. S. Thomas 'A Marriage'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

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 Elsie Mildred Eldridge (‘Elsi’) 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.

(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 PUPILS 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.



A picture of R.S. Thomas and Elsi on their wedding day in July 1940 in Bala



A picture of R.S. Thomas on their wedding day in July 1940 in Bala



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

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 are available via the website of the R. S. Thomas Research Centre, Bangor University:

<http://rsthomas.bangor.ac.uk/research.php.en>

All links are clickable

**PROFESSOR
MATTHEW JARVIS**

*University of Wales Trinity Saint David &
Aberystwyth University
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Gwyneth Lewis

'Advice on Adultery'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

Gwyneth Lewis was born in Cardiff in 1959, to Welsh-speaking parents. Her father taught her English when she was two, to entertain her while her mother was in hospital giving birth to her sister. She attended a bilingual school in Pontypridd, before studying English at Cambridge University. In the 1980s, Gwyneth Lewis was at Oxford, carrying out doctoral work on the eighteenth-century antiquarian and forger, Iolo Morganwg. She also studied at Harvard and in the Graduate Writing Division of Columbia University, and worked for a time as a freelance journalist in New York, before returning to Britain to work as a TV director and producer for the BBC. Lewis’s poetry was met with immediate acclaim when she began to publish in the 1990s. Unusually, she has always written in the medium of English and Welsh; her first book, *Sonedau Redsa (Redsa’s Sonnets, 1990)* was followed by the English-language *Parables and Fables (1995)* and *Zero Gravity (1998)*, which was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for poetry. The first writer to be named Wales’s National Poet, in 2005–6, her words appear in six-foot-high letters on the front of the Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff Bay. Lewis has spoken publicly about her struggle with depression, and explores mental health issues in her book *Sunbathing in the Rain: a Cheerful Book about Depression (2002)*. Marked by an interest in science and theology, Gwyneth Lewis’s writing also reflects a sense of wonder and fascination at the workings of language, which she ascribes to her bilingualism.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'Advice on Adultery' is from the sequence 'Welsh Espionage', in Gwyneth Lewis's first English-language collection, *Parables and Faxes* (1995). The title seems to have a confessional ring, appearing to promise frank advice derived from lived experience, in the manner of an agony aunt or uncle. Importantly, however, Gwyneth Lewis has refuted the label of the 'confessional' writer. She is perhaps more interested in the processes by which we construct and 'put on' a sense of identity, through the language(s) we use.

We might also notice the title's wittily (wickedly) double meaning: on the one hand, it appears to offer a moral warning about adultery, but read another way, it promises advice on how to commit adultery. The poem, of course, plays with both meanings, refusing to offer a single standpoint of moral authority.

'Parables'; 'Espionage'; these words resonate with the themes of doubleness and deception that permeate Lewis's writing. The critic Alice Entwistle sees treachery as a keynote of Lewis's poetics, a motif that she connects to Lewis's bilingualism (1). Lewis has explicitly figured her bilingualism in terms of betrayal, stating in an interview that it is 'still regarded in some quarters as a betrayal of the Welsh language' (2). Significantly, she surmounted this problem by embracing a kind of 'double life', as a poet who writes in both languages. This poem, then, looks at how standards –of behaviour and morality (particularly those relating to gender and sexuality) are constructed through language. It also explores the hazards, tensions, and pleasures that are generated when you move between different linguistic worlds.

Form.

The form of this poem is more complex than might initially appear. It is arranged, wittily enough given the subject matter, in six-line stanzas (sestets). Written mostly in free verse, it also makes use of iambic pentameter. Together with the regular use of enjambment, this serves to approximate the rhythms of the speaking voice. The influence of traditional Welsh strict-metre poetry can also be seen in the poem's frequent use of alliteration and sound correspondences, which often link the first and second parts of the lines. The stanzas, too, are linked to each other by repetition: the final words of each line are the same in each stanza, although they are presented in a different order each time. In this way, the poem calls attention to its own craftsmanship and artifice – an artifice that mirrors the deception and play-acting of the characters in the text.

(1) Alice Entwistle, *Poetry, Geography, Gender: Women Re-writing Contemporary Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), p. 96.

(2) Gwyneth Lewis, interview with Alice Entwistle (unpublished, November 2006).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1 - 6.

The opening lines of the poem appear to offer advice to one who has committed, or who is thinking about committing, adultery: **'The first rule is to pacify the wives'**. In fact, the speaker's use of the second person would seem initially to position us, the readers, as the adulterers. But who is doing the seducing here? The speaker's confident tone and use of the word **'rule'** in line 1 act to present the advice as a statement of fact, a prescription for right action. However, the poem as a whole is more ambiguous and undecidable in tone. Its frequent shifts in perspective deny the reader any clear moral standpoint from which to read events; it is all, the text would seem to suggest, a manner of seeing - or saying.

The rhetoric here mimics, rather comically, love guidance in a woman's magazine (we are reminded of Lewis's background in journalism), or eighteenth-century etiquette manuals for middle-class female comportment. A tension is also subtly introduced between purity and impurity. The speaker's declaration that **'You're pure of heart'** seems a little disingenuous (can anyone claim that they are completely so?), especially when backed up in the next line by the claim that you **'know the value of your youthful looks'**. This suggests that the addressee has a canny, even self-interested awareness of her (or his) effects on others; perhaps her **'golden', 'pure'** appearance is therefore deceptive, mere artifice. The reported comments on the interlocutor's **'lovely back'** introduce a central image to the poem. The **'back'** becomes a motif for gossip (talking behind someone's back), and deceit (going behind someone's back). It also points to a kind of denial or evasion of self-identity in the text, for although she is always being talked about, the identity of the addressee is never fully revealed; she always has her **'back'** to us.

Lines 7-12.

Line 7, **'In work they treat you like one of the men'** highlights the sense of gender fluidity and instability in this poem; previously depicted as a young, romantic heroine, reminiscent of the idealised figure of the Petrarchan sonnet, the addressee's gender identity is blurred by the wives' talk, when she is figured as being **'like one of the men'**. The irony here inheres in the use of double-edged meanings. The wives' **'hope / you'll never have children... it ruins your looks'** could be read in the sense that they wish the young person will avoid their fate, or as a curse on youth and beauty, reminiscent of the witches and evil queens of fairy tale. The speaker's recommendation to **'pacify the wives'** in line 1 seems to reiterate a stereotypically patriarchal attitude, presenting the wives as hysterical and childish. Yet this perspective is gradually mocked and undermined as the words of the poem undergo subtle shifts in meaning. Here, for instance, the phrase **'dicky heart'** derives its humour from the punning use of 'dicky' (which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, can mean of inferior quality, sorry, poor; in bad condition, unsound, shaky, 'queer'). The word also carries associations with 'small' (dicky bird) and the childish term for penis. Though they seem to profess wifely concern, then, the women's language acts to send up the unfaithful husbands who form the subject of their talk.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 13-18.

'Heart' takes on a different meaning in line 13, as part of the idiomatic construction '**beating heart**'. Contrasting the vitality of the addressee with the over-the-hill-ness of the male objects of her quest, it also hints, disquietingly, at a kind of violence hidden behind the sexual and power relations of office life. This stanza also conjures and explores the tension between truth in poetry (as suggested by the speaker's reference to '**The fact...**') and unsurety ('**Cross your fingers**'). The act of '**Cross[ing] your fingers**', moreover, underlines the 'double-crossing' at the heart of this poem.

These lines also display Lewis's technical virtuosity. Words are linked together across different lines by sibilance (**wives/stare/sourly/Cross**) - an effect that conjures, perhaps, the angry 'hissing' of whispers at office parties. Patterns of assonance link together the first and second halves of the lines (parties/heart, affair/men). In this way, words are looped together in a tangled web of meanings that reflects the tangled web of personal relations in the office.

Lines 19-30.

The allusion in line 19 to '**A trip to the Ladies**' reinforces the everyday vision and colloquial register of the poem. This choice of phrase reveals gender as a kind of construction in language: the writing on the toilet door defines and separates out 'Ladies' from 'Gents' artificially - just as the English and Welsh languages are separated from each other in the social world. Stock phrases embedded in everyday speech, such as '**men will be men**' perform the same function, the poem would seem to suggest. Exposing how this use of language acts to excuse and naturalise the men's behavior, the text subtly adopts a more questioning tone. Its ironical knife-edge again hinges on its use of double-edged meanings. '**She knows you're innocent, but the wives, /well, jump to conclusions from the way it looks...**' masquerades as an expression of support, but is actually a tacit accusation. The addressee's imputed conviction that '**They don't understand**' points to the theme of non-comprehension. The speaker's advice to '**stick with the men**' since '**only they are au fait with affairs of the heart**' speaks of the bilingual's (often fickle) preference of one language over the other on the basis of it being better at expressing her innermost feelings. The use of untranslated French here points to a sense of complicity with the gender group defined as '**the men**', suggesting that the addressee (or perhaps, the speaker) considers herself an initiate into their supposedly sophisticated language community.

Lines 31-9.

These lines undercut the romantic discourse of the previous stanzas with a narrative of betrayal. The man's claim that '**looks / aren't everything**' seems disingenuous in the context of the attention devoted to the addressee's looks in previous lines. This semantic backtracking is reinforced by his betrayal of her confidence: 'He's told the men', who ostracise her with their '**smirk[s]**' and '**wink[s]**'.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 31-9 (continued).

The **'broken heart'** points, perhaps, to the anguish faced by young women in a social arena bent on their objectification. Yet it also conjures the sense of fracture and loneliness at the **'heart'** of the bilingual subject, who never quite belongs to any one language culture. The poem ends, however, on a note of **'hope'**, presenting the addressee's capacity for shape-shifting as a source of empowerment: **'Ignore the men, start sleeping with the wives'** turns the poem's conventional, 'heteronormative' world-view on its head, and emphasises the irrepressible vitality at the heart of language's deception.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

Critic Katie Gramich has commented on Gwyneth Lewis's 'formidable technical dexterity' and 'apparently unlimited metaphorical scope', and these qualities are clearly evident in this poem (3). Lewis has frequently expressed the condition of being a bilingual poet in terms of adultery, writing in her preface to *Keeping Mum* (2003) that 'it's a difficult domestic arrangement, but it holds' (4). She characterises her use of English words as something thrilling and illicit, accompanied by a lingering sense that she has betrayed her 'mother tongue'. 'Advice on Adultery' explores these tensions, without (contrary to what the title might imply) trying to resolve them. As the title of the collection from which the poem is taken, *Parables and Faxes*, suggests, Gwyneth Lewis is a poet attuned to the modern world. Grounded in the mundane realities of office life, 'Advice on Adultery' is rather prescient, anticipating the flurry of gossip and opinion that is a feature of life in the internet age. Yet it also draws upon Lewis's interest – stemming from her doctoral work on eighteenth-century forgery – in questions of authenticity in poetry, and the slipperiness of meaning and identity as expressed in language. This poem finds joy and creativity in language's duplicitousness, as well as the 'duplicity' of the (bilingual) writer. The play of different voices and perspectives points to Lewis's sense of '[t]he friction, fluidity, cacophony, and subversive impulse of bilingual poetry' (5).

(3) Katie Gramich, "The Shapes She Makes": Contemporary Welsh Women Poets', *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 62 (1999), 68–74 (p. 70).

(4) Gwyneth Lewis, Preface to *Keeping Mum* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2003), p. 9.

(5) Laura Pfeffer, 'Challenging Tongues: The "Irreducible Hybridity" of Language in Contemporary Bilingual Poetry', *Synthesis*, 4 (2012), 149–167 (p. 149).

FOUR QUESTIONS PUPILS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Who is speaking here? Whom is she or he speaking to?

How many different meanings are attached to the word **'heart'**? What do these different meanings suggest?

Is this a poem more about love and relationships, or more about language?

Do you think the speaker's advice is any good?

PHOTOGRAPHS

• <http://www.gwynethlewis.com/img/gl-3.jpg>

• <http://www.bloodaxebooks.com/content/categories/l/55770c23cc5c0.jpg>

The first image shows Lewis in front of the words of her poem inscribed on the Wales Millennium Centre, emphasising her role in Wales's cultural self-definition following devolution and the formation of the National Assembly in 1998. The second image portrays the poet as a vibrant and outward-looking figure, and serves as the cover shot for her recent book, *Quantum Poetics* (2015).

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

The writer's own website provides up-to-date biographical details, as well as helpful descriptions of and insights into her different publications, in English and in Welsh:

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

The Poetry Archive website offers a detailed biography of the poet – including some of her important literary influences – and downloadable audio recordings of the poet reading her own work:

<https://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/gwyneth-lewis>

The author page on the Seren publisher's website gives a simple summary of Gwyneth Lewis's career and publications, including her writing for television and the Welsh National Opera:

<https://www.serenbooks.com/author/gwyneth-lewis>

All links are clickable

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MCAVOY**

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Deryn Rees- Jones

'From His Coy Mistress'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

Deryn Rees-Jones was born in Liverpool in 1968. She was brought up in the English city, but always retained what critic Alice Entwhistle describes as a ‘keen but edgy sense of connection with her father’s native Wales’ (1). Spending significant periods of her childhood in Eglwysbach, North Wales, she later went on to read English at the University of Bangor. After completing a literature PhD at Birkbeck College, University of London, Rees-Jones returned to work at the University of Liverpool in 2002, where she is now Professor of Poetry. Her first collection *The Memory Tray* (1994) was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection, and was followed by *Signs Round a Dead Body* (1998), *Quiver* (2004), and *Burying the Wren* (2012). Her Selected Poems, titled *What it’s Like to be Alive*, were published by Seren in 2016. Rees-Jones also works as a literary critic; her critical account of modern and contemporary women poets, *Consorting with Angels*, appeared in 2005. Collaborations with artists are important to her creative practice, and she recently worked with artist Charlotte Hodes on the book and poem-film, *And You, Helen* (2014), about the life of memoirist Helen Thomas, wife of the poet Edward Thomas. The shifting patterns of desire and dynamic uncertainty that characterise Rees-Jones’s poetry might be connected to her relation to Wales; she once told poet Gillian Clarke that the colourful Welsh phrase books that so fascinated her as a child ‘stood for a part of me I couldn’t get to know, but which I wanted all the same’ (2).

(Further biographical details are available in the Library of Wales anthology *Poetry 1900–2000*, ed. Meic Stephens, p. 824).

(1) Alice Entwhistle, *Poetry, Geography, Gender: Women Rewriting Contemporary Wales* (Cardiff: Cardiff University Press, 2013), p. 36.

(2) Gillian Clarke, ‘The power of absence: Gillian Clarke in conversation with Deryn Rees-Jones’, *Planet*, 144 (2001), 56.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'From His Coy Mistress' offers a female-centred riposte to a canonical, male-authored poem, 'To His Coy Mistress', by Andrew Marvell (1621-1678). Marvell was one of the group now known as the Metaphysical poets, whose works are marked by ingenious conceits (improbably extended metaphors), wit, and a concern with both philosophical subjects and the body. 'To His Coy Mistress' dramatises the plea of a male speaker to a female addressee, urging her to consummate their love affair. Using all the arts of wit and persuasion at the poet's disposal, the speaker pushes what was then a conventional plea to new, imaginative and metaphorical heights. The gender imbalance inherent to Marvell's poem – and the tradition from which it stems – is that while the implicitly male speaker is passionate and prolix, his female addressee remains chaste and silent: we never hear her point of view. Indeed, the creativity of his poetic speech is perhaps occasioned by – necessitated by – her silence. Writing back from the point of view of the 'Coy Mistress', Deryn Rees-Jones uses a historical guise in order to insert her own voice and, in a related sense, female desire, back into English-language literary tradition, in an encounter that is cerebral, spiritual and erotic at the same time.

Form.

Marvell's poem is written in the form of a dramatic monologue, in which an imagined speaker addresses a silent listener (usually not the reader). It is important to note that with this form, the poet traditionally speaks with a theatrically assumed voice, not her/his own. 'From His Coy Mistress' pays testimony to the dramatic monologue, particularly when the speaker invokes and addresses the desired '**you**' in the third stanza. In her book *Consorting with Angels*, Rees-Jones stresses 'the importance of the dramatic monologue to the woman poet's textual self-making' (3). Here, she can be seen to shape a space and an identity for the woman poet, her body and desires, precisely by putting on *another voice*: as Rees-Jones writes, 'the monologue seeks to embody the speaker while also saying that the presence of this body is not the poet's.' (4) Yet, while Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' frequently uses the first person plural, 'we', to persuasive effect, Rees-Jones's poem far more often uses 'I' – and never 'we'. This suggests that her poem is more about an encounter between difference, a crossing and mixing of 'I' and 'you', rather than an idealised 'we'. But this strategic use of the first person singular also places the text within a more self-reflective, lyrical idiom, which serves as a vehicle for exploring how desire and passion work both to construct, and to unsettle (and ultimately transform) the self. The final two lines isolate an ecstatic moment of opening out and proximity, where the speaker sings along with the sensual world. Rees-Jones eschews Marvell's neatly rhyming couplets for a looser form, in which rhyme and sound correspondences link the different stanzas, and often incongruous ideas, together.

(3) Deryn Rees-Jones, *Consorting with Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets* (Highsgreen, Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2005), p. 13.

(4) Rees-Jones, *Consorting with Angels*, p. 14.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-4.

'To His Coy Mistress' famously opens with the statement 'Had we but world enough and time', and '**From His Coy Mistress**' similarly opens with a reference to time, albeit with a very different sense and effect: '**Some days I think**'. While the temporal span summoned by Marvell's speaker is immediately vast and expansive, allowing the lovers to pass 'our long love's day / ... by the Indian Ganges' side' or 'the tide / Of Humber', Rees-Jones's speaker identifies a more diminutive, everyday kind of temporality. The first stanza continues to go against the grain of Marvell's poem; where his speaker urges his object of desire to throw caution and morality to the wind and join him in sexual delight, here, the speaker seems to seek to retreat from this sexual experience into a more solitary and contemplative space.

From a historical perspective, the speaker's declaration that '**I think I will become a nun, / book in a convent miles away**' could be read as a reference to the relatively limited number of options available to women in Marvell's seventeenth century, at least when it came to desire; broadly put, either they risked social ostracism by engaging freely in sexual activity, or they relinquished themselves to marriage and endless childbirth, or they retreated from sexual relations entirely, via the religious life. In this sense, the voice appears to be ventriloquizing a historical persona, the imaginary seventeenth-century beloved of Marvell's speaker. However, there are clues that the speaker might be more contemporary than that. Comedic effect is provided, not only by her use of hyperbole (for instance, she compares men, and presumably sex, to a kind of drug or poison that she must '**purge**' from her body), but also by the poem's rather odd mixing of the old with the contemporary: the speaker imagines '**book[ing] in**' to a convent as though it were a rehabilitation clinic, or a hotel. Further, she plans to '**cut off [her] hair**' (the traditional emblem of female sensuality), but nuns were (and are) only expected to cover their hair with a veil or wimple. These 'mistakes' or anachronisms call attention to the fact this is a modern, contemporary voice, self-consciously *trying* on the identity of a seventeenth-century woman longing to be a nun – longing as this modern voice does for an identity which is more autonomous, not subject to the power of '**men**'. The alliteration of sharp consonant sounds in '**convent**' and '**cut**' conjures a sense of decisiveness and scission – even if this resoluteness to break off from '**men**' and the world of sensual pleasure is more imaginary than actual. '**Cut**'; '**purge**'; although presented as a way of escaping the dominance of desire, this language of purification appears to direct a kind of violence inwards, towards the speaker's own body.

Lines 5-9.

The poem's shift to the conditional tense underlines its status as an imaginary, even utopian exploration of creative possibilities: the poem's 'I' and 'you', rather like the lovers in Marvell's poem, are shown to exist in a suspended, conditional space. The declaration '**I'd kneel and pray and chant a lot, / lie in a narrow bed**' conveys, perhaps, a longing for creative autonomy, for a separate space in which the speaker can '**[devise] titles of unwritten books**'.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 5-9 (continued).

There is an emphasis on books and writing (or not writing) in this stanza, and given Rees-Jones's expertise in twentieth-century women writers, the shadow of Virginia Woolf's famous feminist treatise, *A Room of One's Own*, can be detected here. Yet what it is the speaker *really* wants remains ambiguous in this fantasy. She herself seems ambivalent: although she imagines throwing herself with enthusiasm into life as a nun (**'I'd kneel and pray and chant a lot'**), she also sees herself as secretly inventing ideas for titles that would appear decidedly inappropriate to the ascetic life: **A Semiotics of Flirtation** and **Love: Some Concepts of the Verb 'To Sin'**. Although these books (which wittily send up the seriousness of academic language) might point to writing as a means of harnessing the disordering effects of desire, they also point to Rees-Jones's sense of the centrality and inescapability of fantasy, the double life. Writing is no escape from the body, but the door through which the desire enters to disrupt life again.

Lines 10-13.

Here, the speaker pulls back on the sense of uncertainty and vacillation of the previous stanzas, with the statement **'One thing's for sure'**. It would seem that desire – **'wanting you'** – gives her access to a kind of truth from which to build her identity. This suggestion, however, is thrown into doubt again by the following line, in the declaration **'I'm not the woman that I think I am'**. There's a witty re-writing of philosophical tradition in this line, which echoes René Descartes's famous formulation, 'I think therefore I am'. While Descartes presented the rational, thinking self as the basis for reality and identity, the perspective of this poem could be summarised as 'I feel therefore I (am not what I) am'. Thought is always, this poem implies, entangled in the body and its desires; the one sure thing in an unstable world is also the most uncertain. That line 12 (**'I cannot eat or sleep at all'**) is shorter than the rest in the stanza conveys a sense of restraint, disembodiment – even death. In this sense, it echoes line 6, **'lie in a narrow bed'**, which is similarly shorter than those that surround it. Interestingly, however, while line 6 was connected to the rites of the nun, line 12 is connected to physical desire, as suggested by the speaker's meditation on **'your lovely mouth'**. In this way, a subtle connection is posed between religious spirituality and sexuality that finds full fruition at the end of the poem.

Lines 14-17.

The enjambment that links lines 13 and 14 introduces a new sense of fluidity of thought and feeling, previously contained and impeded by the carefully end-stopped lines – as if the speaker's carefully defended sense of self were now flowing out into her environment. Yet this environment is, we can note, an imaginative, poetic landscape, made up of **'the eerie moonlight and the Northern seas'**. The moonlight (traditionally associated with femininity and transformation) and 'Northern seas' evoke a cold, starkly beautiful vision, suggestive of spirituality.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 14-17 (continued).

This imagery points to the speaker's longing for travel and a sense of elsewhere; like Wales, this spiritual and imaginative landscape is a liminal place, on the periphery. Here, it is identified with desire and creativity. The speaker shuffles in this stanza between what might be called 'eccentricity' (being on the margins), and centrality, as suggested in the image of her body as a temple, a centre of meaning and worship. In an extended metaphor that is suggestive both of permanence and impermanence, the speaker imagines the lover rediscovering her body '**a hundred years from now**', as though it were a lost civilisation. Whereas time at the beginning of the poem was diminutive, here it is stretched, elongated, immense: desire extends it, just as it transforms the speaker's '**narrow bed**' into a '**temple**'. In fact, the long temporalities of the final part of this poem stand in contrast to the urgency and quickness of Marvell's text: here, the lovers have time.

Lines 18-19.

These final two lines, separated off from the rest of the poem by a space and thus accentuated, offer an ecstatic song of praise to the body's life: '**burn incense in, and dance and sing, /oh, yes and weeping, worship in.**' In contrast to the relative restraint of the first two stanzas, the seemingly involuntary exclamation 'oh, yes' conjures a sense of overflowing emotion. The worship of the body involves both joy and its opposite, pain ('**weeping**'), but both are rolled up in an overriding sense of celebration.

The final lines offer, as they often do in Metaphysical poetry, a kind of paradoxical resolution. The image of the body as ruined temple is ambiguous: it speaks of the self as fractured and fragmented - even destroyed - by desire, a suggestion that is perhaps supported by the 'broken' appearance of the last two lines. But the lovers' ritual celebration of that body is also given the power to revive and renew. These lines emphasise the world of the senses, including smell ('**incense**') and sound ('**sing**'). There is a sense of exchange between inside and outside in the figurative depiction of the lovers' embrace: 'incense' is evocative of '**incense**', the outside world becoming inner, but it is also linked through assonance to '**sing**', a verb that carries the idea of air/sound leaving the inner cavities of the chest and becoming part of the outside world.

Similarly, clever phonic echoes and assonantal patterns bind together different, sometimes contradictory ideas explored over the poem. '**Sing**' harks back to a title of one of the speaker's imaginary books, '**To Sin**', thereby reconfiguring bodily shame as celebration, and frustrated literary creativity as fulsome creative expression. '**Worship**' points back, through 'ship', to the '**Northern seas**', presenting desire (like poetry) as a journey of discovery that is transformative to self and other. On one level, the roles ascribed to the lovers, with the female speaker as temple and her lover as archaeologist/adventurer would seem to replay the gender norms found in poems like Marvell's. But the absence of pronouns in these lines suggest that the separate identities of the lovers are submerged and altered (altared?) in their shared celebration of the speaker's body.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'From his Coy Mistress' comes from Deryn Rees-Jones's second collection of poetry, *Signs Round a Dead Body* (1998). The name of this collection might seem to signal a preoccupation with loss and/or poetic language as a series of mysterious signs or clues – themes that frequently resurface in Rees-Jones's work (5). But in fact this book is perhaps more centrally concerned with the life of the body and with making the body live, in all of its contradictions and vibrancy, through the medium of poetry. It also offers an extended meditation on erotic love, charged with personal feeling yet laced with irony, and – in fitting with Rees-Jones's scholarly interests – explores the construction of gender identity in and through poetry. 'From his Coy Mistress' exemplifies many of these concerns.

This poem, then, can be seen as 'writing back' to a male-authored tradition of love poetry that worshiped women as a muse without really allowing space for the expression of their own desires.

At the beginning, the speaker parodies and ultimately undermines the whole idea of female 'coyness' by 'overdoing it', turning coyness into a forceful dramatic art in itself (just as Marvell's speaker 'overdoes' the role of ardent male lover, to great effect). And as the poem progresses and the speaker gradually reflects on, and embraces, her imaginative and sensual longings, she becomes anything but 'coy' – expressing instead a mutual physical desire that is equated (through the incense) with prayer and creativity.

Through its references to Marvell's poem, 'From his Coy Mistress' can be seen as a consciously intertextual piece of writing – that is, it crafts its meaning in relation to another text. Rees-Jones has herself noted in relation to other women poets that their 'use of intertextuality, while not necessarily always parodic, can almost always be read in terms of its potential for subversion.' (6) The subversive potential of this poem lies in its tendency to open up new perspectives on past and present. Rather than rejecting a male-authored tradition completely, it transforms the love-language of the Metaphysical poets from within, to give new voice to women's creativity.

(5) Her book *Quiver* (2004), for instance, reworks the poetic murder-mystery genre pioneered by Rees-Jones's friend, poet Gwyneth Lewis. See Lewis's *Y Llofrudd Iaith* (1999) and the English version, 'The Language Murderer', in *Keeping Mum* (2003).

(6) Rees-Jones, *Consorting With Angels*, p. 17.

FIVE QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Who is speaking in this poem? Whom is s/he speaking to? What sort of person does the speaker seem to be?

How does the speaker portray the life of a nun? Is s/he positive or negative about it?

How is the speaker's lover depicted? What is the effect of this?

Is this poem a happy or a sad one, in your opinion? What evidence can you find to back up either interpretation?

SECTION 5

(links active September 2018)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

An image of Deryn Rees-Jones by Jemimah Kuhfeld

[//bit.ly/2QT8yYj](https://bit.ly/2QT8yYj)

An image of the author on the website of publisher Bloodaxe

<http://www.bloodaxebooks.com/content/categories/l/5576f0471b650.jpg>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

The Poetry Archive website includes a short but informative biography, a recording of Rees-Jones reading her poem 'Persephone', and other downloadable audio files of the poet:

<https://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/deryn-rees-jones>

The website for the Leverhulme Trust project on contemporary Welsh poetry in English, 'Devolved Voices', offers a bibliography and video interview with the poet:

<https://wordpress.aber.ac.uk/devolved-voices/media/interview-deryn-rees-jones/>



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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 and Wales, The Learned Society of Wales, and the Association for Welsh Writing in English.

Alun Lewis

'Goodbye'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

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, it 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'.

(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).

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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MCAVOY**

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Sheenagh Pugh

'Toast'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

Sheenagh Pugh was born in Birmingham in 1950, took a degree in Modern Languages at Bristol University and lived for many years in Cardiff, where she worked as a civil servant before lecturing in creative writing at the University of Glamorgan. She retired in 2008, and moved to Shetland, where she still lives and writes. Author of two novels and a critical work (about fan fiction), as well as eleven poetry collections, Pugh was – alongside Gillian Clarke among others – one of the first women to earn attention and acclaim for her poetry in Wales.

Partly as a result of this early visibility, her work has been widely anthologised, and appears in most of the significant anthologies produced in or about Wales in the course of her career, including *The Bright Field* (ed. Meic Stephens, Carcanet), *Twentieth Century Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (ed. Dannie Abse, Seren) and *Welsh Women’s Poetry 1460–2001* (ed. Katie Gramich, Honno). Despite this status, Pugh does not encourage her readers to identify her particularly with Wales, although she has written poems which are located there. ‘Toast’ is unusual in its detailing of its location, although in fact Cardiff is used chiefly as frame for, rather than focus of, the poem’s central themes: the passing of time, beauty and desire.

Pugh has been a prolific reviewer for much of her career. Her sometimes trenchant views are revealed in these and other writings, including essays, features and the interviews she has given over the years (for a recent example, see *In Her Own Words: Women Talking Poetry and Wales*, by Alice Entwistle, pp. 135–148). As with the issue of her sense of cultural identity, Pugh has never welcomed being marked out for her gender. She has however given scholars and writers permission to discuss her work in both contexts, as long as they note her reservations.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'**Toast**' appears in Pugh's ninth poetry collection *The Beautiful Lie*, published in 2002. The title is playful, humorously punning on the idea of a toast – a celebratory drink, offered by a gathering of people to honour someone or something, perhaps for a special event or achievement – and the golden crisping effect of intense heat on, say, bread, of course. The poem is thus a 'toast', to the toasting bodies of the sunbathing workmen which the poem's middle-aged and apparently female speaker mischievously savours, and anticipates remembering, with such relish.

Alongside its clever and comic reversal of poetic convention (in which a male speaker describes the frequently erotic attraction of a usually younger, beautiful, and invariably silent woman), the poem offers a poignant meditation on age, aging and memory, as well as desire. Surreptitiously, it studies the ways in which memory, as well as humour, can help to ease and console against the passage of time, and its effects on bodies, places and the self.

Form.

'Toast' is composed entirely of couplets, or two-line stanzas. In some ways this choice of form underlines the doubleness of meaning of the title, and the other kinds of doubling or reversals, both playful and more serious, in which the text is also openly interested. The couplets aren't strictly end-rhyming, in any regular or conventional way; aural echoes between different words through the poem, both at line-ends and elsewhere, help to link different lines and stanzas. This adds to the sense of fluidity in a poem in which only two stanzas end on a full stop. The remainder run on, or 'elide', across the (visual) gaps between them; this technique (also called enjambment) affords the poet the chance to exploit the tension set up between and among different couplets.

For all its apparently relaxed formality, the fifteen stanzas of 'Toast' fall into two main parts, each marked by an end-stopped stanza. The first part is nine stanzas long; the second six. The ratio of lines – 18:12, cancelling down to 3:2 – is reminiscent of the relationship between octave and sestet (4:3) of a conventional sonnet. This does not seem accidental. 'Toast' is haunted by the conventions of the love poem; the poet's handling of the form helps to confirm her not entirely playful interest in the literary traditions in which 'Toast' is rooted.

Lines 1-7.

The poem's first couplets strike the light-hearted note which prevails in the first part of the poem. In conventional fashion, they locate the poem – in the centre of Cardiff – and just as importantly anchor it in time: the '**summer**' preceding the millennial year for which Cardiff's internationally-known Millennium Stadium (now the Principality Stadium) was named and built, in time for the 1999 Rugby World Cup. However the poem's speaker deftly points us into a second time frame with the opening words '**When I'm old...**'.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1 - 7 (continued).

This sounds more like a throwaway remark than it turns out to be. In the first place, it indicates the speaker's intention to retain the events and experiences which the poem rehearses for later use, in memory. By extension this means that the poem's chief theme, transience, and the remorseless effect of time on youth, beauty and confidence, is at work on the reader's consciousness from its start, for all the naivety of a phrase we've surely all used.

The first couplets introduce the events and people the poem celebrates: the **'toast of Cardiff'**. It seems worth pointing out, however, how the architecture of the first three couplets controls reader expectations, before the poem arrives at this gleeful pun. The opening couplet introduces the **'they'**, but teasingly, ends before it qualifies the pronoun. Thus we are lured over the line ending (**'I won't mean'**), to the blunt dismissal of **'the council'**. Which leaves the builders themselves. But, as if to deliberately entertain herself (the speaker is implicitly female, although the poem avoids actually gendering the voice it uses), we move to the anticipated pleasure of (**'hugging'**) the memory of the **'young builders'** sprawling (for tantalised readers, across two lines and a stanza break),

golden and melting on hot pavements, the toast of Cardiff.

The deliberate delay deepens our sense of the enjoyment to be found in replaying the scene (today, of course, two decades old) which the poem celebrates and savours. In this sense, a little like the sunbathing men it describes, the poem seems to **'open'** itself both **'to sun and the judgement / of passing eyes'**; to flaunt its own form with the same careless abandon, and to surprise us out of our expectations.

Lines 7-12.

The unabashed delight which the speaker takes in the sunbathers sprawling on the city's **'hot pavements'**, caused as much by their lack of self-consciousness as their number and beauty, is comic and infectiously entertaining. The idea that the very heart of the city – the busy streets which meet at Cardiff's parish church of **'St John's'** – is anointed, or **'blessed'**, by the **'fit bodies'**, gleefully inverts the convention that church brings spiritual sustenance to people. This summer, it works the other way. Again, there is a sense that like the builders, the speaker refuses the judgement which these perhaps (mildly) shocking views court. However, it is also now that the seriousness which we might have already sensed at work in the text emerges explicitly, as the speaker tilts us into an unapologetically erotic, rather than smutty, depiction of the bodies themselves, taut with youth (**'unripe'**).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 7-12 (continued).

Note how the description itself stretches over both line and stanza breaks, and how the analysis neatly dodges any reproach: their very public self-display confirms that the men themselves are happy to be viewed precisely as the speaker represents them:

**[...] forget
the jokes, these jeans were fuzz stretched tight**

**over unripe peaches. Sex objects,
and happily up for it.**

Lines 12-18.

In these lines, again, the play of humour and seriousness is finely balanced. On the face of it, they invite us to witness the effect of the men's display on the nature of the city itself. Thanks to them, the sexual energy – the attraction of men for women, or as the poem points out, men for men – which daily life here as anywhere embraces, is fetched into the sunlight, as it were. The very streets seem erotically charged, and here again, the traditionally objectifying gaze which man turns on silent desirable woman is inverted, and its controlling power somehow diffused by the pleasure which the attention – figured, gently and generatively, as sunshine – produces:

'When women / sauntered by, whistling, they'd bask / in warm smiles, browning slowly, loving / the light.' In this easy environment, nobody seems to mind (**'It made no odds'**) who enjoys who: **'they never got mad'**. In the warmth of summer, the (**'heady'**) pleasures of youth, beauty, desire and desirousness – **'being young and fancied and in the sun'** – are mutual and contagious. Significantly, the poem ensures that this last point is made on a single line, and for once the sentence ends with the line break, so the stanza is firmly 'end-stopped'.

Lines 19-22.

It is here, recovering the **'now'** from which the speaker has been recollecting 'the summer they built the stadium', that the poem's mood alters, as might happen in the sestet of a conventional sonnet. The shift enables the full emergence of the text's other main theme: time, its passing, and the changes it works on people and places. Sunbathing bodies have been replaced by the **'vast concrete-and-glass mother-ship'** of the building which drew them to the city in the first place. One kind of perhaps 'awkwardly' alien experience has given way to another decidedly more inhuman and less joyous-seeming one (thanks to the **'dark'** which teeters, suggestively, on the end of the eleventh stanza). However, the poem is not yet done with surprising us, as the next stanzas make clear.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 22–28.

The following lines, unfolding the remainder of the sentence which begins **'Westgate's dark'**, reveal that **'dark'** is adjective, not noun; only the **'November rain'** is darkening the roadway. The change wrought by the season and weather masks another, more deeply buried, and less bleak: the heat and youth of the workmen's bodies seem to have imprinted themselves on the city's very substance.

The comparison with **'sand'** doesn't only – again – bring the beach (thus, once more, the vanished summer) to the cityspace; the simile also picks up on the time-related diction and imagery threading through the poem as a whole. This touches the image with irony: sand is a popular marker for the passage of time (think of egg-timers), decay and the transience of human life. Something of those young men's beauty, and the pleasure they brought to the summer months, remains figured in the **'shallow cups'** of Cardiff's (**'now'**) damp pavements, and etched on the unexpectedly personified **'empty auction house'**, its **'grey façade'** and **'boarded windows'** seeming more than coincidentally elderly, lonely and unsatisfied.

Lines 29–30.

The poem's final, neatly controlled couplet imagines that, like the speaker (apparently anticipating her own elderliness and loneliness), the building revisits a memorable summer less with nostalgia or self-pity, than to resavour its bliss. The legacy of the vanished summer – **'sweat, sunblock, confidence'** (the unromantic language of this conclusion might come as a last surprise) – seems some consolation if not compensation for the passage of time and the pitiless effects of aging.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

In a short piece about herself which you can find on her website, Sheenagh Pugh remarks 'I like to use poems to commemorate people and places, sometimes to amuse, to have a go at things I don't like (censorship, intolerance, pomposity) and above all to entertain'.

<http://sheenagh.wixsite.com/sheenaghpugh/aboutme>

As the reading above is intended to indicate, 'Toast' can be said to do most of these things: it commemorates not only the building of what is currently called the Principality Stadium, but the workforce whose labours made this 'mother-ship' the landmark structure and focus for Wales' capital city it has become. Pugh has herself described the poem as a 'celebration' of the summer it describes, which happened to be a particularly hot one, 'and the way people felt'. But 'Toast' also amuses, and might justifiably be said 'to have a go at' certain kinds of 'intolerance' and (in its casual, even slangy words and phrasing), the kind of self-consciously 'poetic' language and mannerisms which can seem 'pompous' to some readers.

Technically, the poem can be called a dramatic monologue, partly because it uses the first-person 'I' (although there are elements traditionally associated with this form of monologue which this text doesn't observe: identifying its speaker, for example). Like most poets, Pugh positively discourages readers from assuming that the voice of one of her poems is actually *hers*. She warns students who are studying her work: 'Above all, don't suppose that "I" is necessarily the poet. Poets have a saying, "I is a lie", and it's often true. Writing in the first person doesn't mean you are writing of your own personal experience. Poets make things up; it's our job.'

<http://sheenagh.wixsite.com/sheenaghpugh/exam-resources>

That said, it is well worth paying attention to the ways in which the voice and diction of 'Toast' help to direct and influence the way the text works, and affect the reader. Note firstly, for example, how the palette of images weaving through the text is (unobtrusively but tightly) restricted to words or expressions associated with youth, age and/or the passage of time: **'forget', 'unripe', 'browning slowly', 'clock', 'sand', 'grey'...**

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE (CONTINUED)

In its interest in time, and linking of this with bodies, youth, beauty and desire, this poem openly and deliberately converses with its own long literary history: the 'lyric poem' has been used to examine and celebrate love, its causes and effects, and to lament or disclaim the deleterious passage of time on the human body, from the very first. From this perspective Pugh is doing nothing very different from those astonishing sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers who made this habit so much a part of what scholars still call the 'English' poetry tradition: Wyatt, Shakespeare, Donne, Marvell and their peers. The humorous stance and flavour of this text might seem surprising, but even a casual reading of Shakespeare's sonnets, for example, and certainly Donne will rapidly confirm that humour, sometimes in the rather obvious form of (often saucy) puns, but also irony, sardony and satire, play an important part in the courtly romance traditions which these writers drew from medieval European literature and made their own.

One way in which Pugh rings the changes on that literary history is her choice of the couplet, rather than sonnet, for her poem, even if in doing so she is careful to retain some of the sonnet's architectural balancing of scene-setting and reflection as outlined above. More seriously and significantly, Pugh's poem also discreetly upends two central habits of that same long-lived tradition. Firstly she turns the poem's gaze on the young men it celebrates. In doing so, 'Toast', as suggested, dismisses many centuries of writing in which the speaker's gaze is male, and directed, whether in tender devotion or lust, at the usually young, often unavailable, and invariably silent woman he has chosen as object of and for his desire. This swipe at literary convention mischievously reverses the gender power relations the tradition presumes on, and seems part and parcel of the poem's serious/comic intentions overall. That said, the sun-worshipping workmen are still mute, and to some extent thus silently objectified by the unashamedly desirous gaze of the speaker, as well as other shoppers who **'sauntered by, whistling'**, male and female. However, it is hard to argue with the speaker's conclusion that the workmen welcome the attention (**'happily up for it'**), given the lack of self-consciousness in their self-display. After all, those who didn't want to be constructed as **'Sex objects'** were presumably eating their lunches, clothed, somewhere less visible. In allowing us to evaluate the scene for ourselves, Pugh ensures that her speaker avoids exploiting the objectifying power of the (usually male) gaze which male poets have long presumed on, and implicitly thumbs her nose at that - again long-lived - convention.

Pugh's work (and specifically 'Toast') is discussed from a variety of perspectives in *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry* (by Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle, Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 248-249. Her inclination to write in ways which take her, and a wide range of poetic personae of both genders, out of familiar or recognisable surroundings is examined at more length in *Poetry, Geography, Gender: Women Writing Contemporary Wales* (Alice Entwistle, University of Wales Press, 2013), pp. 137-142.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Why do you think the poet decided to write 'Toast'? Can you explain and justify your answer?

Do you find this poem funny? When/where and why?

How does 'Toast' ask us to view the voice it places centre stage? With sympathy or disapproval? Why have you reached this conclusion? Does it matter?

What do you find surprising or unexpected about this poem? Why? To what extent and in what ways do the qualities or features you have chosen seem significant to its key themes?

PHOTOGRAPHS

SECTION 5

(link active September 2018)

All links are clickable

An image of Sheenagh Pugh on the Poetry Archive website, taken by Caroline Forbes.

• <https://www.poetryarchive.org/sites/default/files/styles/220x170-live-recordings-block/public/Sheenagh%20Pugh.jpg?itok=hayEiiMz>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

For information about her poems uploaded by the poet, visit her website:

<http://sheenagh.wixsite.com/sheenaghpugh>

She manages two other websites:

<https://sheenaghpugh.livejournal.com/>

<https://sheenagh.webs.com/>

<http://resource.download.wjec.co.uk.s3.amazonaws.com/vtc/2015-16/PoetryInWales2017/Clips/Toast-commentary.mp4>

All links are clickable

**PROFESSOR ALICE
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August 2018*



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Nigel Jenkins 'Wild Cherry'

A HELPSHEET FOR TEACHERS



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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

Nigel Jenkins (1949–2014) was a poet, teacher, playwright, critic, and writer of creative prose. Brought up on a farm on the Gower peninsula, he went on to study at Essex University and work as a journalist in England (via a brief stint as a circus-hand in America). On his return to Wales in 1976 he learned Welsh and remained in Swansea, becoming a full-time writer and lecturer in Creative Writing. He started publishing poetry in the 1970s and his *Acts of Union: Selected Poems* appeared in 1990. In later years he became adept in the demanding poetic form of the Japanese haiku, as evidenced in his 2002 book, *Blue: 101 Haiku, Senryu and Tanka*. His absorbing travel book on the Welsh missionaries in northern India, *Gwalia in Khasia*, won the Wales Book of the Year prize in 1996. His work is often concerned with political and social themes relating specifically to Wales, and can range in style and tone from the devastatingly satirical to the tender and intimate. He had a beautiful, resonant speaking voice, which can still be heard and appreciated in the broadcasts he made for the BBC and S4C.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'Wild Cherry'. The poem focuses on the blossom of the wild cherry tree. Cherry blossom is especially beautiful because the tree is covered in a cloud-like mass of flowers, which last only for a short time; in Japanese culture, the cherry blossom (sakura) is particularly prized, and is associated with life's ephemerality, as well as its beauty. In English poetry, too, the cherry blossom is associated with love, beauty, and ephemerality, as in A. E. Housman's lyric from *A Shropshire Lad* (1896): 'Loveliest of trees, the cherry now/Is hung with bloom along the bough,/And stands about the woodland ride/Wearing white for Eastertide.' Similarly, in Edward Thomas's poignant First World War lyric, *The Cherry Trees*, 'The cherry trees bend over and are shedding,/ On the old road where all that passed are dead,/ Their petals, strewing the grass as for a wedding/ This early May morn when there is none to wed' (1).

Form.

This is a free verse poem arranged in three five-line stanzas. Free verse means that the poem lacks traditional rhyme and metre. It also allows the poet considerable freedom in syntax and punctuation, opening the possibility of run-on lines (enjambment) and giving free rein to a conversational tone.

First stanza (lines 1-5)

The poem opens on a dynamic and precarious image of the first-person speaker balancing on tiptoe on a wall, in order to reach the best branches of white cherry blossom. The verb is in the past tense, so the speaker is looking back on this experience, perhaps ruefully. The blossoms are being gathered as a gift for an unspecified 'you'. The fact that the speaker makes a great effort to reach 'the fullest, the/flounciest sprays' and that he 'travelled many miles' to present the gift indicates that the flowers are an emblem of love. The fact that the speaker seeks the 'fullest' sprays suggest the excessive nature of his emotions; the intensity of his desire is also indicated by his effortful actions of 'reach[ing]' and 'travell[ing]'. The unusual word 'flounciest', both in its superlative degree, and in its meaning of 'an ornamental appendage to the skirt of a lady's dress' (OED) again connotes something excessive and perhaps outrageous. It calls to mind an old-fashioned femininity, too, indicating that the speaker may wish to please the beloved with this quaint gesture of regard.

(1) Cf. also Edward Thomas's 'In Memoriam (Easter, 1915)', in which the blossom mentioned is certainly that of the wild cherry: 'The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood/This Eastertide call into mind the men,/ Now far from home, who, with their sweethearts, should/ Have gathered them and will do never again.'

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

First stanza (lines 1-5) [continued]

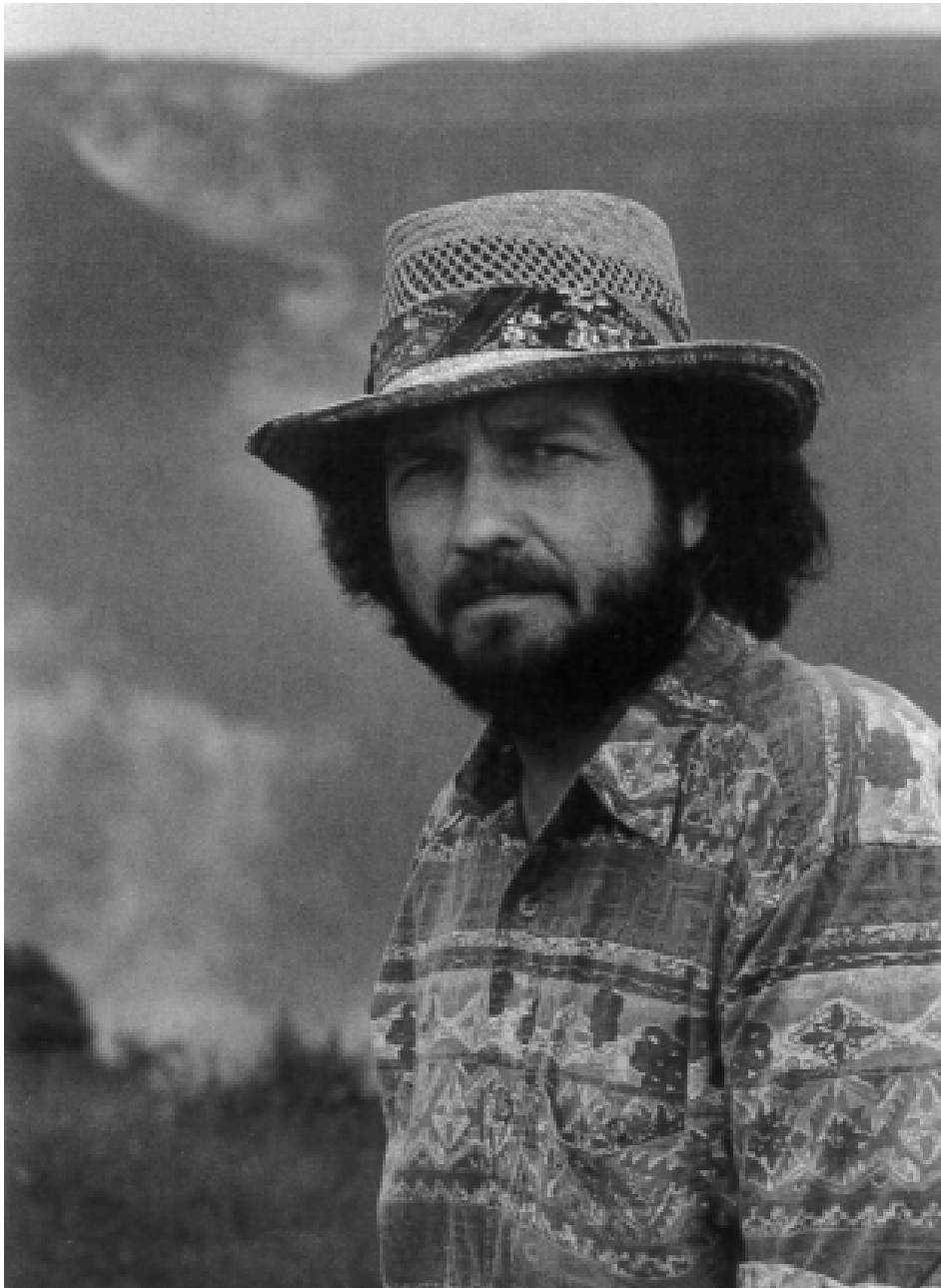
Alternatively, '**flounciest**' may indicate a certain self-conscious embarrassment on the part of the speaker. In any case, the speaker's positive and hopeful state of mind, when he selects the '**fullest**' and '**flounciest**' branches, is emphasized by the 'fl' alliteration, and by the assonance between 'clouds' and 'flounciest'. The diction and rhythm are quite conversational, enhanced by the enjambment in each line of the stanza.

Second stanza (lines 6-10)

The setting shifts here from the scene of picking the wild cherry blossom to a domestic interior where the 'you' has received the offering and has placed the sprays of blossom in a jar on the table. The '**I**' and the '**you**' face each other across the table, separated by the jar of flowers. Initially promising, since the flowers are accepted by a '**smiling**' recipient, the scene becomes tense, as indicated by the repetition of the word '**between**', emphasizing separation. Words are exchanged, described as '**white clouds**', which echoes the initial description of the cherry blossom, but here the connotations of the image change from lightness and ephemerality to obscurity and obfuscation. Moreover, the phrase '**there were words**' may indicate that the two argue, since '**having words**' is often used as a euphemism for having an argument. The stanza ends, ominously, with an ellipsis, indicating that whatever the speaker has attempted to express in words has either been rejected or misunderstood. The ellipsis actually suggests a failure of words: in the gap created at the end of this stanza lies all the unexpressed disappointment or heartbreak of the speaker. The failure of communication is also indicated by the end-stopping of this stanza's lines, contrasting strongly with the run-on lines of the opening stanza.

PHOTOGRAPHS

- <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/visiting-woods/trees-woods-and-wildlife/british-trees/native-trees/wild-cherry/>
- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanami>
- <https://alchetron.com/Nigel-Jenkins>



LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Third stanza (lines 11-15)

The third stanza addresses the aftermath of the failed encounter and, again, the failure is partly symbolised by the cherry blossom. The speaker still retains one branch, picked at the same time as the offering to **'you'**; while this suggests a sharing of the beauty and emotional symbolism of the flowers between the two locations and people (lovers?), it also means that, projecting into the future, he will know when her flowers wilt and fall because his flowers will do so at the same time. The imagined synchrony of the death of the flowers suggests the withering of the relationship between the two people. Still focusing on **'you'**, the speaker imagines her clearing up the remains of the cherry blossom and disposing of them **'with the ashes/and empties'**. Because the cherry flowers, briefly, at Easter, as both Housman and Thomas mention, it may also be associated, paradoxically, both with the fresh new life of Spring and with the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on Good Friday. The **'ashes'** bring to mind the grief and repentance of Ash Wednesday, while also being a powerful general image of death and futility (2). The **'ashes'** are paired with **'empties'** – possibly a reference to putting out empty milk bottles or the discarding of empty bottles of wine or other alcoholic drinks – suggesting the void which now exists between the two, and contrasts effectively with the image of plenitude and beauty with which the poem opens. Noteworthy, also, is the fact that in this final stanza, it is **'you'** who is active, **'brush[ing]'** and **'toss[ing]'**, clearing up the detritus of the dead flowers, while in the first stanza it is **'I'** who is dynamic and daring in his actions. The final, bitter-sounding phrase, **'yesterday's news'** (referring to the old newspaper in which the ash is collected as well as the idiom connoting that someone/something is not worthy of attention), links up with the repeated **'words'** of the second stanza, creating an impression of the futility and ephemerality of human expression. Like that emblem of transience, the cherry blossom, the poem indicates that human relationships, too, are short-lived and lead to sadness and regret when they are over. This final stanza contains a mixture of verb tenses, such as **'I'd kept'** (pluperfect), **'I'll know'** (future), **'you brush'** (present) which contrasting with the simple past tense used in the first two stanzas. This self-consciousness about time passing may be seen as underlining the theme of ephemerality hinted at by the cherry blossom itself .

(2) Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, which in the Christian calendar is the period of penitence leading up to Easter. On this day ashes are placed in a cross on the Christian worshipper's forehead as a reminder that, in the words of Genesis 3:19, 'dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.'

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'Wild Cherry' appeared in Nigel Jenkins's *Acts of Union: Selected Poems 1974-1989*. In some ways it is an uncharacteristic Nigel Jenkins poem. He is better known for politically-engaged poems which deal with the situation of Wales or with capitalism and the aftermath of colonialism. Ostensibly, this poem has no relation to any of these characteristic concerns. However, Jenkins was a poet who wrote on a very wide variety of topics; as Matthew Jarvis points out in his essay 'Repositioning Wales', 'his concerns span such issues as anti-war protest, aspects of farm life, the murder of Lorca, and poetry about punctuation.' (3) In Jenkins's *Selected Poems*, though, there is a persistent undercurrent of poems about the natural world, as indicated by titles such as 'Primroses', 'Snowdrops', 'Autumn Leaves', 'Gorse' and 'Silver Birch'. (4) Moreover, in a poem entitled 'Where poems came from', Jenkins reflects on the gap between '**words, books of them/ yellowed in the classroom cupboard**' and his speaker's childhood perception of the poetry out in the world, unarticulated in words: 'For there's a space/in things, a gap between/ the words for it and a wave's/ movement'. (5) This reflection appears to be echoed in the ellipsis after 'words' in 'Wild Cherry', along with the sense of an unbridgeable gap between the two people unable to express themselves.

One of Jenkins's concerns in the latter part of his career was with Japanese poetic forms, and he published a volume of his own haiku, which may relate to his use of the wild cherry blossom as the central image of this poem. As noted above, cherry blossom is a key image in Japanese art and poetry, while the tradition of cherry blossom viewing in Spring (hanami) is an integral element of Japanese culture. Influenced by Buddhist thought, the cherry blossom symbolizes both beauty and ephemerality; its appreciation by humans is a kind of pleasurable duty, indicating one's understanding and acceptance of the brevity of life. Jenkins would have been aware of these connotations when he chose to focus on the cherry blossom in this poem about failed love. (6) His later volume of haiku, *Blue* (2002), includes one on cherry blossom: 'against sunned red brick/ the pink white explosion/ of a lone cherry -// and I don't want to leave it,/ the pavement, the day, the tree'. (7) Again, like 'Wild cherry' this poem appears to celebrate the transient beauty of the blossom, while hinting at the similar ephemerality of human life.

(3) Matthew Jarvis, 'Repositioning Wales: Poetry after the Second Flowering' in *Slanderous Tongues: Essays on Welsh Poetry in English 1970-2005* ed. Daniel G. Williams (Bridgend: Seren, 2010) pp. 21-59: p. 40.

(4) Nigel Jenkins, *Acts of Union*, (Llandysul: Gomer, 1990), p. 33, 38, 84, 125, 138.

(5) Nigel Jenkins, 'Where poems came from', *ibid*, pp. 24-5.

(6) Jenkins suggests a similarity between early Welsh gnomic poetry and Japanese haiku in the Afterword to his co-edited collection, *Another Country: Haiku Poetry from Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer, 2011), p. 148.

(7) Nigel Jenkins, *Blue: 101 Haiku, Senryu and Tanka* (Aberystwyth: Planet, 2002), p. 31.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

His interest in Japanese art was only one facet of Jenkins's internationalist outlook. His earliest published poems are set in Morocco, while some of his most impressive satirical poems deal with the United States, and his thoughtful prose reflections are often about India and its colonial history, in which Wales has been intimately involved. Thus, although much of his work bears comparison with the Welsh nationalist poets of the so-called 'Second Flowering', such as Harri Webb, his poetic horizons are much broader than theirs. Indeed, he articulated this himself when he wrote in the poem 'Advice to a Young Poet': 'Sing for Wales, sure, but don't shut your trap/on all the rest - it ain't crap.' (8)

(8) Quoted in Matthew Jarvis, 'Repositioning Wales', op. cit., p. 44; Jarvis points out that Jenkins' lines are a response to, and rebuttal of, Harri Webb's notorious couplet, 'Sing for Wales or shut your trap -/ All the rest's a load of crap', *ibid*, p. 57.

FIVE QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Why does the title specify that this is a *wild* cherry tree?

What are the implications of the phrase 'head in/clouds'?

Why do you think the poem is written in free verse rather than in a rhymed, lyrical form?

Why are the 'words' spoken between 'I' and 'you' not articulated in the poem?

Is the 'you' female? Why does [s]he not speak?

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/nigel-jenkins-politically-engaged-and-outspoken-poet-whose-work-often-landed-him-in-trouble-with-the-9124685.html>

https://www.planetmagazine.org.uk/planet_extra/nigel-jenkins-obit/

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-south-west-wales-25924608>

Nigel Jenkins reading from his work are available on Youtube, e.g. :

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNSU_1JOcYA

**PROFESSOR
KATIE GRAMICH**

*Cardiff University
August 2018*

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

Dannie Abse

'Epithalamion'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

Dannie Abse (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 Ogmere-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 Spenser, 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).

(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).

(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/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.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 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

**PROFESSOR
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August 2018*



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Dannie Abse

'Not Adlestrop'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

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

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

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

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

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

Form.

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

Lines 1 - 6.

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

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

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1 - 6 (continued).

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

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

Lines 7 - 11.

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

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

Lines 12 - 15.

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

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 12 - 15 (continued).

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

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

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

Lines 16-22.

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

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

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 16 - 22 (continued).

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

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

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 19 - 22 (continued).

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

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

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

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

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

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

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

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

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

How is body language important in the poem?

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

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

PHOTOGRAPHS

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

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

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

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

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

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.

Gillian Clarke

'My box'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

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.

[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.

[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.

[10] Emyr Humphreys, *The Taliesin Tradition* (2000), quoted in Alice Entwistle'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.

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?resize=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.

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=cuKxqIJZg00>

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>



**DR SIRIOL
MCAVOY**

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Literature and Language of Wales, Swansea
University
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Eiluned Lewis

'The Bride Chest'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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

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



ADRIAN OSBOURNE

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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.

Eiluned Lewis

'Ships' Sirens'

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

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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.

'**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 himself, 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.

(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>

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We welcome comments and feedback on the helpsheets, including suggestions for further resources; please email: k.bohata@swansea.ac.uk

