

Eiluned Lewis

'Ships' Sirens'

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.

'**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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