

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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