

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

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