

In Hospital: Poona (I)

- by Alun Lewis -

Background information

Teachers can choose whether to provide the context in advance or let the students try to work out as much of the context as they can from the poem itself (although remember that context is not assessed in the final piece). Of course this also depends on whether the two other Alun Lewis poems have been explored so far.

Quotation from <http://www.writersplaques.org/plaques/?id=138183>

[Alun Lewis] had already won a measure of fame as a soldier poet: *Raiders' Dawn* quickly sold out and was reprinted six times. It was well received by reviewers and a public attracted by its combination of tragic vision and passionate lyricism. Lewis collected his short stories in *The Last Inspection* (1943). This brought him further acclaim, for the stories portray with sympathy, directness and an unmistakable authenticity the vicissitudes of army life in the long period of waiting and training that followed Dunkirk. In the winter of 1942 the battalion was shipped to India and eventually settled under canvas near Poona. Early in 1943 the poet spent six weeks in hospital after breaking his jaw during a football match and then contracting dysentery. To this period belongs 'Ward "O" 3B', one of his finest stories. Intense creative activity followed as he absorbed the experience of India, embodied in poems like 'The Mahratta Ghats', 'In Hospital: Poona, 1 and 2', and 'Burnla Casualty', as well as a number of stories, notably 'The Orange Grove'.

Quotation from http://wlajournal.com/24_1/pdf/roy.pdf

1943 [was] a year which began with Lewis fracturing his jaw in a regimental football match and spending one and half months at a Pune hospital where he was twice operated upon. Prior to returning to Nira in March 1943 as intelligence officer who would make numerous reconnaissance trips to the Mahratta Hills, he wrote "In Hospital: Poona (I)"...

Activities

A

Identifying the key people in a poem is a necessary first step. This activity is intended to lead the learners into the poem in a helpful way.

Who are the 'I' and 'you' in the poem? How can you tell? Look at the title. Look at the beginning of the second stanza.

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B

Once learners have understood the sense of sharing the same night-time, the close connection/relationship between the man and the woman becomes clearer.

C

This obviously requires some geographical understanding, and a site such as <http://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/europe/wales/ukwlatlog.htm> could be helpful.

D

If the first sentence is highlighted in red, the second in green and the third in blue, the structure of the poem is made visible. In many cases poems are misunderstood because the punctuation is not looked at closely enough. Learners can be encouraged to 'read-through' line endings which do not have any punctuation mark.

E

Once the geography and the sentence structure are understood, this question becomes more manageable. In his imagination he is back in Wales.

F

Learners in different parts of Wales will no doubt respond differently to the places mentioned, perhaps reacting most strongly to more local names. It may be appropriate to refer to 'hiraeth' and teachers could look at sites such as: http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/yourvideo/media/pages/val_bethell_01.shtml

What does 'the whole of Wales / Glided within the parish of my care' suggest? Who would have a parish? What does the word 'care' imply? Why 'the whole of Wales'?

What thoughts and feelings are suggested by the choice of language to describe the landscape in the third, fourth and fifth stanzas? What area of country is covered? What do the names evoke/represent?

Learners may be guided (directly or indirectly) to (some of) the following: **leap**; **riding**; **Threshing**; **scratched**; **great**; **great**; **yacht**; **mountains**; **valley**; **boulders**. Evocative place names can also be referred to.

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G and H

Learners should be able to identify the second dash as a turning point in the poem, and the end of the sequence where the gap between the lovers has 'Vanished.' They can explore the language choices in the final stanza, with the negative associations of 'crake' and 'starving' contrasting with the final line starting: 'But love survives ...'.

Further activities

I

What might be implied by 'the venom of the snake'?
What is the potential poison/venom in their present situation?

J

Are the final two lines hopeful?
The words 'heart' and 'break' are usually linked as heartbreak. What is different here?
What is the implication of the word 'But'?
Do 'Time' and 'venom' still retain their power?
In the contrast suggested in the last line, what wins?

K

Identify the rhyming pattern in the poem and the number of syllables per line.
What is the effect of any aspect of rhyme or rhythm?
Are all stanzas four lines long? Are all lines ten syllables long?
Where any pattern is broken, see if you can suggest a reason/comment on the effect.
Rhyming tends to give a more settled and secure feel to a poem. Why might Alun Lewis want this more consistently here than in a poem such as 'Goodbye' or 'Song'?
What is the effect of successive lines rhyming at the end of the poem, and only here?