

Goodbye

- by Alun Lewis -

Background information

Alun Lewis wrote this poem to his wife, Gweno, as he was leaving for active service in the army. Before you study the poem, learners could jot down a few ideas about what they think the two lovers would be experiencing on their last night together, perhaps for many months, perhaps for ever.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBRVTJY2dGM>

You can hear Alun Lewis read this poem on this YouTube site. Teachers need to decide whether the animation adds or detracts from the experience learners will receive. It might be advisable to use the sound only, at least at first.

The following biographical background is from:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/wales/posts/death_of_poet_alun_lewis

Alun Lewis was born in Cwmaman on 1 July 1915 and died on the Arakan Front in Burma on 5 March 1940. In between he was educated at Cowbridge Grammar School, the Universities of Aberystwyth and Manchester and spent some time as a teacher at Pengam. In the years immediately before the war he fell in love with a fellow teacher, Gweno Ellis, and wrote stories and poems.

Lewis was beginning to get published when war broke out in 1939. An incredibly sensitive young man, he was not ideally suited to life as a soldier. He had no desire to kill and for a while considered registering as a conscientious objector.

His disgust and horror at what Hitler and the Nazi regime were doing in Europe eventually led him to understand that he could not stand aside while others fought, and so, in March 1940 - his mind still full of doubt and confusion - he enlisted in the army. ...

He married Gweno shortly before being given a commission in the South Wales Borderers. Although his first book, *Raiders Dawn And Other Poems*, was soon published by Allen and Unwin, he was miserable and lonely, clearly at sea in a world and an army that had little time for sensitivities and esoteric things like poems and stories.

He would soon be lonelier still as in October 1942 he and his unit set sail for India, a country that, to Alun and Gweno, was a whole world away. ...

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Activities

A

This question is partly intended as a possible model for exploring a poem. Identifying any people involved makes a significant step towards understanding a poem, and pronouns are often a key here.

B

Teachers can decide whether to give the war context of the leave-taking before exploring the poem, or whether to allow the learners to work out (from the last stanza) how the poet establishes the context. Please remember that context is not assessed in this piece.

If they are invited to think about any difficult leave-taking they have experienced themselves, this may help bridge the gap between their world and the world of the poem.

C

If learners have explored single inverted commas for thoughts and double inverted commas for speech in their own writing about their own experiences, or are given the opportunity now, this may help them explore Alun Lewis' technique here.

'Lay' in this context (stanza 3, line 2) means 'place' or 'put'. What does the image of 'mummy-cloths' suggest about the nature of the silence? After dehydration, the mummy was wrapped in many layers of linen cloth. If his head is wrapped round and round with linen cloth, is this keeping the memories out or keeping the memories in? Why might he find it difficult to talk about his memories with his wife at this point in his life?

D

Learners can explore whether 'Eternity' refers to an endless separation, or the possibility of meeting again, or is a deliberately ambiguous choice by the poet.

Why might they be staying in accommodation like this? Where might they have travelled to in order to delay the moment of parting?

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E

The selection of the best quotations is obviously important, but the next essential step is to use the quotation to make a significant point about the poet's language choices. The speaking frame may help in taking this next step.

F

Again, learners may use the selected quotation to make a significant point about the poet's language choices.

If you type 'our selves' into a typical word processor, these two words will be underlined to indicate a possible typing error. Why do you think Alun Lewis chose to write 'our selves' rather than 'ourselves'?

Selfishness implies only being concerned with one's own feelings and totally ignoring the feelings of others. Once selfishness has gone, what does the poem imply is left for them?

In the last two lines of stanza 6, the breathing and actions of the two lovers are seen as part of nature. What is the effect of this link between humans and nature? Would you say it makes the poem more hopeful or sad or neither at this point?

G

Learners can be invited to argue for the most evocative noun, the most powerful verb, and the most effective image.

H

Comparing two levels of experience can be a useful way for learners to explore tensions and ambiguities in poems. The everyday world of sewing is contrasted with the entire 'universe'.

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Further activities

I

The poem is set at a critical moment in their lives together. Sum up briefly what the poem refers to about their past, their present and future.

The learners can discuss which words give the clearest idea of their relationship in the past (Stanza 3 line 1? Stanza 7?), the present (Stanza 1? Stanza 5? Stanza 6?) and the future (Stanza 3 line 1? Stanza 5? Stanza 8?).

J

The second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme. What do you think would be the effect if the first and the third lines also rhymed? Is there any form of rhyme between the first and third lines of the final stanza? Why might this stanza be different?

In half rhyme the last consonant rhymes but not the preceding vowel, such as 'sun' and 'moon'.

K

Remind yourself of the context given to you before you read the poem: Alun Lewis wrote this poem to his wife, Gweno, as he was leaving for active service in the army. How much of this context could you obtain just from studying the words in the poem? (although remember that context is not assessed in the final piece). Consider if this has any implications for preparing to write about an unseen poem.

What information do you only learn in the final stanza? Does the fact that you know that this is a poem about two actual people caught up in the Second World War affect your response in any way?