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Resources for Teachers

WJEC AS/A Level English Literature
Unit 2: Poetry Post-1900

Alun Lewis

Collected Poems

(Seren)

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Biography

Alun Lewis (1 July 1915 – 5 March 1944) was a Welsh soldier-poet and is regarded as one of the finest English-language writers of the Second World War. Before his death in 1944, Lewis published one volume of poems and one volume of short stories, with many of his stories, poems and essays appearing in literary magazines, newspapers and anthologies in his lifetime. Further selections of his work have been published since his death, including a second poetry collection he prepared during his life-time. His poetry is perceived as authentic, featuring succinct yet poetic language, vivid detail, and a sometimes romantic tone. While Lewis is chiefly valued for his poetry, his stories and his letters are also highly-regarded examples of war-writing. Specifically, his work is valued for the ways in which it captures an ambivalent sense of identity, the atmosphere of military life, the emotional strain of being removed from family and friends, and his time in India. Some of his early stories and poems, and a posthumously published novel *Morlais*, are about Aberdare and form part of the important body of industrial writing which emerged from Wales in the thirties and forties.

Lewis was born on July 1st 1915, in Cwmaman, Aberdare, a mining village in south Wales. Alun was the eldest of four children and his father, Thomas J. Lewis, was the English master at the village school (Glynhafod County School). His mother, Gwladys Elizabeth, had also taught English briefly. The Lewis family were atypical compared to the predominantly working-class community, with T. J. Lewis' position as an English-teacher ensuring a middle-class upbringing for Alun and his siblings. While his father and much of the village were bilingual, Alun, his siblings, and his mother spoke only English, and thus, for reasons of class and language, the Lewis family's life did not revolve around the usual community hubs such as the village Miner's Institute or a Welsh-language chapel. The size of the Lewis family meant their lifestyle was comfortable rather than wealthy, and Lewis's parents were politically minded, aware of the industrial struggles and misfortunes of their neighbours; the period of Lewis's childhood saw the General Strike and lockouts, while injury, death and mental illness were common in the village. Alun Lewis grew up in a period of decline, as coalfield prosperity collapsed, and many young people migrated out of the valleys in large numbers. Lewis remained sympathetic towards the mining communities of south Wales throughout his life.

In 1926 Lewis sat the County Entrance Exam, winning top marks, and was awarded a scholarship to attend the grammar school in Cowbridge, in the Vale of Glamorgan, 20 miles from Cwmaman. Lewis was boarded at the school and this separation from his family, as well as the attitudes of the strict headmaster, Richard Williams, were a source of difficulty for Lewis, whose parents had encouraged his independent streak. The English teacher Eric Ainslie Reid was a major influence on the young Lewis, instilling in him a love of literature, as well as ideas about world peace and the role of the League of Nations. Lewis was active in the school's Debate Society and was encouraged by Reid to publish his poetry and stories in the school magazine. In 1932, Lewis received a Mold Eisteddfod Open Scholarship to the University College of Wales at Aberystwyth. Lewis published

poetry and stories in the college magazine, joined a discussion club, and received a first-class degree in British and European history in 1935. In September of that year, aged 20, Lewis moved to Chorlton, having won a Harry Thornton Pickles Postgraduate Studentship to study history at Manchester University. Lewis published his work in the college magazine and did well at his studies, but, distressed by the urban poverty he encountered and missing his friends and family, he also experienced one of the first depressive episodes which would mark the rest of his adult life.

After concluding his MA in 1937, Lewis knew that writing was central to his life, but decided to train as a teacher. In the same year Lewis attended an international summer school in Pontigny, northern France, and left with a renewed belief in pacifism and anti-militarism. Initially unable to find teaching work, Lewis worked as a sub-editor for the *Aberdare Daily*, before landing a teaching job at the grammar school in Pengam in late 1938. In the summer of 1939, he met Gweno Ellis, who taught German at Mountain Ash Grammar School and by the end of the following year they were engaged. They married in Gloucester on July 5th, 1941.

By this point, with the Second World War underway, Lewis had begun to establish himself as a poet and short-story writer, with his work being featured by newspapers such as *The Observer* and *Manchester Guardian*, as well as in literary magazines such as *Time and Tide* and *The Welsh Review*, which had been founded in 1939 to provide an outlet for Wales's new generation of English-language writers. The outbreak of war distressed Lewis, causing an internal conflict between his pacifism and his belief that fascists such as Hitler must be confronted and defeated. Lewis partially reconciled this moral dilemma by enlisting with the Royal Engineers in May 1940, training at their camp in Longmoor, Essex. Lewis was frustrated by the passivity of camp life and by military hierarchy, and he resolved to make his experiences the subject of his writing. During this period, the themes of death and beauty emerge as major focuses of his writing, including in poems such as 'The Sentry' and 'Raiders' Dawn'. Shortly after arriving at Longmoor, Lewis received volumes of Yeats' and Edward Thomas' poems, and they became major influences on his work; he even visited Thomas's former home at Steep in October 1940. Lewis admired Thomas as a poet but also saw in him a kindred spirit, a fellow reluctant soldier. Lewis's 'To Edward Thomas' was written at this time and demonstrates this emotional connection, while his 'All day it has rained...' serves as an answer to Thomas's 'Rain'. While in camp, Lewis also enjoyed the company and correspondence of other Welsh writers and visual artists, including the Argentine-Welsh poet Lynette Roberts (whose 'Poem from Llanybri' was an invitation for Lewis to visit her home and Lewis's poem 'Peace' was his gift to her), her husband Keidrych Rhys (another soldier-poet), and John Petts and Brenda Chamberlain. The latter two – a married couple who were poets, artists and engravers living in Llanllechid – collaborated with Lewis on a series of poetry broadsheets which became known as the Caseg Broadsheets, a project which was a sign of Lewis's belief that writers should be committed to public action.[1] Lewis stated that the goal of the Caseg Broadsheets

1 Broadsheets were large, single-sheet texts with poetry printed on one side only, to present a clear, focused idea to their readers. Lewis was familiar with 17th and 18th century broadsheets, which featured ballads accompanied by images pressed from woodcut engravings, and the Caseg Broadsheets were modelled on this form (*Alun Lewis & the Making of the Caseg Broadsheets*, Brenda Chamberlain (Enitharmon Press, 1970) p. 6).

was "to reach the people with beauty and love", to mix poetry and art with poverty, politics and economics, and consequently bring art to a wide audience.[2] In essence, Lewis felt the Broadsheets would educate their audience about the pressing political and social problems of the time, though Chamberlain and Petts were less optimistic.

Determined to overcome the Engineers' passivity, Lewis joined the Officer Cadet Training Unit in Haysham in July 1941, shortly after his marriage to Gweno. Lewis's profile as a writer was increasing, as he published essays in notable literary magazines such as *Horizon* and featured in a December 1941 article about 'the English Poets' in *Lilliput* magazine. Despite passing his Officers' training with flying colours, Lewis again became frustrated and disillusioned with the rigidity and class hierarchy of the armed forces. Against this backdrop, his first poetry collection, *Raiders' Dawn and other poems*, was published in March 1942, which was well-received. The wider setbacks of the war (including defeats for the Allies at Singapore and in Libya) and Lewis's frustrations with army life led to worsening depression. This bleak mood was broken briefly with the news that Allen & Unwin would publish a collection of his short fiction (*The Last Inspection and Other Stories* would appear in 1943), as well as a summer which Lewis felt was the happiest period of his marriage to Gweno and in which he wrote poems such as 'Goodbye' and 'On Embarkation'. Lewis and Gweno spent some time together in Liverpool before Lewis departed for India and the Burmese front. Lewis, now an officer in the South Wales Borderers, sailed aboard the *Athlone Castle* in October 1942.

Due to fear of U-boats, Lewis's sea voyage took him to India by way of Brazil and South Africa, with the *Athlone Castle* eventually arriving in the city then known as Bombay (now Mumbai) on December 17th, 1942. India engendered mixed emotions in Lewis. On the one hand, he adored the landscape and was fascinated by Hinduism. On the other hand, Lewis was appalled by the poverty and suffering of the Indian people. These issues informed the poetry Lewis wrote during a long period of convalescence in Pune (Poona), following an injury in a battalion football match in January 1943. Poems such as 'In Hospital: Poona (1)' were inspired by his fellow convalescents and the arid, mountainous environment. On February 24th 1943 Lewis was able to re-join his regiment and, as was his duty as Battalion Intelligence Officer, he undertook long-term reconnaissance trips into the Indian countryside. After four months' reconnaissance, Lewis was granted a period of 10 days' leave in July 1943, shortly before he was due to begin a six-week course on Military Intelligence. Lewis stayed in a house called Highfield, near Coonoor, which was home to Wallace and Freda Aykroyd. The Aykroyd family offered their house as a recuperation and respite spot for soldiers. Lewis fell in love with Freda. 'Ways', composed during this time, perhaps best captures the relationship between the two; depicting love as grave, tender, tinged with sadness, and overpowered by the threat of inevitable separation. While their physical relationship was brief, the pair corresponded until Lewis's death.

Following the end of his leave, Lewis travelled to Karachi, and impressed his seniors during the Intelligence training course. Lewis rejected an offer to join the school staff, instead preferring to stay with the South Wales Borderers. After a brief stay in Bombay with Freda, Lewis returned to his battalion. At this time, his mental and emotional

2 From a letter to Brenda Chamberlain, quoted in *Alun Lewis & the Making of the Caseg Broadsheets*, Brenda Chamberlain (Enitharmon Press, 1970), p. 7.

health deteriorated due to several factors: a worsening relationship with his CO, Colonel Cresswell, as well as his absence from Freda, Gweno, and other loved ones, which combined to increase his sense of vulnerability. Simultaneously, Lewis's disillusionment with the armed forces grew, worsened by his acute understanding of the inequalities of British rule in India. As a member of the British officer class, Lewis was in an ambivalent position which caused him to question his participation in the war: how could Lewis uphold and defend British rule in India while his motivation to go to war lay in defending the principles of democracy? 'The Lady in Black' captures his anguish and desolation during the autumn of 1943, which was broken by sojourns into the jungle. 'The Jungle', one of the last poems he wrote, captures the complex feelings Lewis was attempting to process in the final months of his life: the jungle is both appealing and dangerous, a place to be both rested and tested, as well as a canvas onto which the social and political ills of Britain are projected. Lewis returned from his sojourn in the jungle and completed preparations for his second poetry collection in late 1943. *Ha ha! Among the Trumpets* featured poems in three sections ('England', 'The Voyage' and 'India'), and the collection broadly follows Lewis's physical and spiritual journeys as a soldier-poet. During this time Lewis wrote a number of stories which drew heavy inspiration from his experiences in India, some of which appeared in the posthumously-published *In the Green Tree* (1949).

In January 1944, Lewis's battalion began to prepare to join an offensive against the Japanese positions in Burma, planned for early March. These preparations reinforced Lewis's lack of faith in his soldiering, and contributed to a worsening depression. In February the Borderers travelled by train to Calcutta (Kolkata) and from there sailed to Burma and were placed in reserve behind the main positions. Lewis had requested permission to join B Company, who were due to patrol the Goppe Pass (closer to the front) and was allowed to do so, arriving at their camp on Saturday, March 4th. The following morning Lewis prepared to go out on patrol at 5:30am and, a couple of hours later, took his loaded revolver with him as he left his hut. A gunshot was heard and his fellow soldiers found Lewis down the slope from his hut, revolver in hand, with a gunshot wound to his right temple. Six hours after he had been wounded, Lewis died, aged 28.

Lewis's death was ruled as accidental, with Colonel Cresswell reporting that Lewis's revolver was found on the floor next to him – and not in his hand, as several witnesses reported. Fellow members of the Borderers long asserted that Lewis had in fact committed suicide – a conclusion which has since been supported by numerous people, including his biographer, John Pikoulis. In a BBC documentary broadcast in 1993, Lord Chalfont (one of Lewis's senior officers) stated that, in his view, Lewis had committed suicide.

Context

Wales in the early 20th Century

Three factors are hugely significant in Welsh life during the first half of the twentieth-century: economic disaster, religious decline, and linguistic change.

From the mid-19th century onwards Wales had been a major industrial engine and vast numbers of migrants moved to Wales from countries such as Italy, Ireland and England. The Welsh economy began to struggle in the early 1920s as coal mines closed, ending a prolonged period of growth. For an economy so reliant on its industrial output and on coal specifically, this was disastrous. Industrial relations had been strained for some time, and in 1926 there was a General Strike and a much longer period during which colliers stayed out. Wales was then hit disproportionately hard by the Great Depression, a worldwide economic recession which began in September 1929 with the Wall Street Crash. The effects of the crash reverberated through the 1930s. Unemployment hit 25% in major Welsh towns such as Swansea, with 3 million unemployed across the UK. King Edward VIII toured Wales in 1936 to see the poverty himself and was visibly upset by what he witnessed, reportedly stating "Something must be done." While Alun Lewis was growing up, the Welsh population fell dramatically, with 390,000 migrating away from Wales between 1920 and 1939. This population flight was especially pronounced in coal-field areas such as Cwmaman, with the south Wales miner labour force collapsing by half between 1920 and 1933 as young Welsh people moved to English towns and cities in search of work. Poverty became increasingly widespread as mining companies shut down and local authorities across Wales went bankrupt. Alun Lewis began attending Glynhafod Infants School in the autumn of 1920, the same year the school had taken on the task of feeding and bathing its most deprived students.[3] Poverty, illness and injury (a common occurrence in the pits) were rife throughout the valleys.

Just as Wales's previously dominant economic sector collapsed, two of the defining features of Welsh cultural life also declined: the Welsh-language and Welsh Nonconformity. Non-conformity was the name given to a form of Christianity which had broken away from the rule of the Church of England, and refused to conform with the Anglican church's rules and practices and which encompassed a variety of religious bodies. Broadly, it was the dominant religious (and cultural) force in Wales from the 18th century until the early 20th century, educating children in Sunday Schools, and asserting itself in politics from the 1850s onwards. Consequently, Welsh national identity in the 19th century revolved around a view of the Welsh as pious, chapel-going people. A series of 'revivals' (mass outpourings of religious faith which aimed to convert large numbers of people to Nonconformity) erupted across Wales during this period. The last revival, in 1904-05, converted 100,000 people to Welsh Nonconformity. Yet, this revival also marked the last great outpouring of religious

3 See John Pikoulis's *Alun Lewis: A Life* (Bridgend: Seren, 1991) pp. 16-17.

fervour, and Nonconformity's decline was exacerbated by the Great War. As with the coal-driven economy, Nonconformity's strength and reach faded as the 20th century progressed, though its cultural influence lingered in Welsh literature.

Finally, the first-half of the twentieth-century also saw a notable decline in the number of Welsh-speakers. In 1891 the population of Wales was 1.77m of whom 54.5% recorded that they spoke Welsh, and almost half of these were in "industrial belt between Llanelli and Pontypool".[4] In 1901, for the first time, Welsh speakers were not a majority in Wales, with 49.9% speaking Welsh. In 1911, the Welsh population had grown to 2.5 million. However, over the same period, Welsh language use declined to 43.5%, falling to 37.1% a decade later.[5] This population boom, and corresponding decline in Welsh-language use, can partially be attributed to an increase in the work-force, with many people travelling to Wales (including from England) to work in the increasingly busy industrial areas of Wales, particularly the south Wales coalfields. By 1951, the population was still around 2.5 million (demonstrating the economic and demographic stagnation of the inter-war years), but the Welsh-language was spoken by just 29% of the population, with the decline in Welsh-language use accelerating during Alun Lewis's brief life-time.

Linguistic change was driven by cultural factors as well as economic and demographic change. In 1847, a report into the state of education in Wales was published, having been commissioned the previous year by Robert Evans, MP for Coventry. The report largely criticised the Welsh language, Nonconformity, and characterised the Welsh people as uneducated and immoral – and the report even asserted that this was due to the Welsh language itself. The report, compiled by three non-Welsh speaking officers, largely drew on the opinions of Anglican clergy and landowners, who were negatively disposed towards Nonconformity and the majority Welsh-language culture. In Wales, the report became known as *Brad y Llyfrau Gleision* (the treachery of the blue books). Saunders Lewis, the 20th century Welsh nationalist, writer, and founder of Plaid Cymru, called the books the most important nineteenth century documents in Welsh history. The report popularised negative perceptions of the Welsh language to the degree that some Welsh-speaking parents chose not to teach Welsh to their children, fearing it would harm their future prospects. At the same time, English was associated with progress and opportunity. As noted above, while Lewis had a bilingual father, Alun, his mother, and his siblings all only spoke English. As an adult, Lewis professed a desire to learn Welsh, writing to his parents: "I regret my lack of Welsh very deeply: I really will learn it when I come home again."[6]

4 Janet Davies, The Welsh Language: A History (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014; ProQuest Ebook Central), p. 83,.

5 Davies, *The Welsh Language*, pp 87, 88, 91.

6 From a letter to his parents, dated November 23rd 1943, published in *In the Green Tree* (Parthian, 2006) p. 57.

The 'First Flowering' of Welsh Writing in English

Into these broad contexts emerged a group of writers known collectively as 'the First Flowering', with Alun Lewis numbered among them. The group included writers as famous as Dylan Thomas and R. S. Thomas, as well as writers who vanished from sight during the twentieth-century, such as the Argentine-Welsh poet Lynette Roberts (a writer whose work is now once again well-regarded). These writers are generally held to be the first sustained manifestation of English-language writing in Wales and began their careers during the tumultuous inter-war period. Their collective talent is held in such high esteem that they have also been termed 'the Golden Generation'.[7]

The Welsh-language had been the dominant instrument of education and religion in Wales for centuries, and this is true also of literary production in Wales. There were of course English-language writers in Wales before the early twentieth-century, but such writers become increasingly prominent as the 19th century gave way to the 20th century and were particularly notable as writers like Dylan Thomas and Alun Lewis emerged in the 1930s. Such was the strength of the Welsh language and Welsh language literature, however, that the Anglophone Welsh writers occupied a contested, uncertain space. Saunders Lewis even suggested that, if you wrote in English, you were not a Welsh writer (though he would later retract this claim). English-language Welsh writers were perched precariously between a centuries-old Cymraeg tradition in their own land, which (as demonstrated by the founding of Plaid Cymru in the 1920s) was muscular and assertive in response to the decline of the Welsh language, and an established 'English' national literature across the border. In this uncertain space, and in the face of drastic linguistic, cultural, and economic flux, the new English-language Welsh writers made their name.

Due to their relative newness and their shared cultural precarity, many of these writers corresponded with and were known socially to one another. They published in the same magazines and anthologies and, in the late 1930s, two new magazines were created to popularise the 'First Flowers': *Wales* (1937) and *The Welsh Review* (1939). The latter magazine was an early proponent of Alun Lewis and in its pages he came across the engravings of the Bangor-born artist and writer Brenda Chamberlain, as well as the work of her husband John Petts. Lewis wrote to them expressing his admiration for their work and thus initiated the Caseg Broadsheets, which were created for two reasons. Firstly, as part of Lewis's hope that Welsh poetry would reach a broad, general audience ('the People' as he termed it) and secondly, to provide another outlet and textual gathering point for the new English-language writers. Across six broadsheets, Lewis's own work featured, as did that of writers such as Dylan Thomas and Lynette Roberts, as well as translations from Welsh, alongside illustrations by Chamberlain and Petts. The decision to include translations signified that Lewis viewed his own poetry (and the poetry of other English-language writers) as a continuation of the centuries-old Welsh literary tradition. Lewis therefore served as a kind of catalyst for the 'First Flowering' while

7 M. Wynn Thomas, Emyr Humphreys Chair of Welsh Writing in English at Swansea University, used this phrase to describe the English-language Welsh writers of the 1930s and 1940s in the S4C documentary *Caradoc Evans: Ffrae My People*, broadcast in 2015.

trying to bridge its cultural distance with the Welsh language. The broadsheets also signal his view that poets needed to take an active role in the political and cultural life of their time, influencing and shaping opinion, whilst also taking the opportunity to spread beauty and love. Lewis felt that poets should take responsibility for their people and should imagine and lead them to a better world.

Alun Lewis, Britain, and Empire

Lewis's desire to influence opinion and to take direct action – such as initiating the broadsheets and joining the armed forces – demonstrate his differences with the dominant British (often English) literati of the time. The British intellectual climate of the 1930s had been marked by a divide between writers who favoured action and intervention in the events of their time, versus those who were typified by an aversion to action and an attempt at detachment.

This divide was perhaps most starkly exposed by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1937. Major English writers such as W. H. Auden and George Orwell, for example, left England to join the cause of the Spanish Republican government, and dozens more publicly supported the cause of the Spanish Republic against Franco's Fascist insurrection. Some high-profile writers, such as T. S. Eliot, H. G. Wells, and Vita Sackville-West, typified the attitude of non-intervention and publicly stated their neutrality, while a small minority supported Franco. The defeat of the Spanish Republic in 1939 and the failure of the anti-Fascist movement traumatised parts of the British literati, especially those (like Orwell) on the left of the political spectrum, as did the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact in the same year. In the aftermath of these events, writers such as Orwell – previously the most ardent and committed supporters of intervention, willing to take direct, even military action – became disillusioned. Orwell even argued that writers should "give yourself over to the world process, stop fighting against it or pretending that you control it; simply accept it, endure it, record it" (*Inside the Whale*, 1940). Just as major English writers adopted this position of detachment, Lewis emerged as a major writer and began to feel personally and publicly that writers must take action – as typified by his decision to initiate the broadsheets to reach 'the People' and by his escalating involvement in the armed struggle against Fascism, despite his own misgivings about military conflict (first as a non-combatant Royal Engineer, then as an infantry officer in the South Wales Borderers bound for the Burmese front).

Lewis's unease with the dominant political and cultural classes of his time were evident in other ways, too, and were sharpened by his experiences as an infantry officer, both in England and India. While Lewis enjoyed the regular company of the South Wales Borderers (who, like him, were predominantly men from the valleys), his experiences with the rigidity and hierarchy of the military, and especially that of the junior and senior officers, frustrated and depressed him. From an early stage in his experiences as an officer-in-training, Lewis was uneasy at the ways in which military hierarchy mimicked the rigid class divisions of wider British society. Lewis wrote anonymously about his experiences in officer cadet training for the magazine *Horizon*, in an article called 'The Creation of a Class', which was published in September 1941. Lewis confesses his disappointment that the British army, in his view, turned out officers who simply accepted the world as it was (arguably, a position of detachment) instead of creating officers who would actively bear responsibility for "a society based on the many". Lewis's unease and disappointment with the armed forces reached its apogee in India and

manifested in Lewis a disenchantment with British imperial rule. Seeing the poverty the ordinary Indian experienced, Lewis felt he would only have been happy in India if he weren't a soldier, and if Britain and India were 'friends' rather than master and servant.

Reception over time

Lewis's reputation was naturally affected by his death at a young age. Obituarists in Wales and beyond mourned Lewis's passing, including Dylan Thomas, who described Lewis as a healer and illuminator in a radio broadcast. In the immediate years following his death, a variety of Lewis's writings were published posthumously and some were reprinted in new editions. *Letters from India* appeared in 1946, and much of the same content reappeared as *In the Green Tree* in 1949, which also contained some of Lewis's short stories. Lewis's work faded from view in the 1950s, before a *Selected Poetry and Prose* was published in 1966. In the 1980s and 1990s, as writers and academics in Wales began to give more scholarly attention to the work of English-language Welsh writers, Lewis's reputation recovered. Particularly noteworthy is the publication of John Pikoulis' *Alun Lewis: A Life*, a scholarly biography of Lewis which was first published in 1984 and which received an updated edition in 1991. Seren books published several volumes which returned much of Lewis's work to print: *Letters to my Wife* (1989), *Collected Stories* (1990) and *Collected Poems* (1994) have all been reprinted. In 2007, *A Cypress Walk*. comprising letters from Alun Lewis to Freda Aykroyd and a memoir by Aykroyd, was published by Enitharmon Press. Parthian reprinted an expanded version of *In the Green Tree* as part of their Library of Wales series in 2006 and Lewis's centenary year in 2015 completed a remarkable rehabilitation of his writings. Lewis's unpublished novel, *Morlais*, was issued for the first time, and John Pikoulis's *Alun, Gweno and Freda* revealed further details about Lewis's relationship with his wife, Gweno, and his lover Freda, as well as information about Pikoulis's own research into Lewis's life.

Lewis's poetry collections were lauded at their time of publication, with *Raiders' Dawn and other poems* being praised by high-profile outlets such as *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The Dublin Magazine*. Lewis's tender masculinity and tragic vision were praised, and the *TLS* reviewer noted the ways in which death and resurrection recur throughout the *Raiders' Dawn* collection as a whole. *Ha ha! Among the Trumpets* was published posthumously in 1945, with the *Sunday Times* calling particular attention to the centrality of life and death in the collection. Gwyn Jones, the editor of *The Welsh Review*, noted that Lewis was particularly sensitive to the broken, the exploited, and the down-trodden. Lewis earned praise for his short stories during his lifetime, with the *Times* noting his collection *The Last Inspection* showed promising signs for a writer of realistic fiction.

Critical interpretations of Lewis initially focused largely on his accomplishments as a war poet. Richard Poole classified Lewis as a writer who strives to achieve impartiality in his poems, noting the persistent presence of darkness in Lewis's poetry, specifically suggesting that Lewis (and soldier-poets like him) strive to create impersonality in their work as a form of protection against the emotional and mental extremes of war. In one of his critical essays on Lewis published in 1995, John Pikoulis identifies 'two voices' at work in Lewis's poetry: one song-like, delicate, and understated; the other forceful and even theatrical, expressing the hysteria of the war. Similarly, writing in 2001, Jeremy Hooker argues that Lewis's poetry demonstrates a sense of internal conflict, as well as a sense of alienation and isolation. 'The Mountain

Over Aberdare' has been read by multiple critics (including Hooker, M. Wynn Thomas, and Tony Brown) as a poem which positions Alun Lewis as both a part of, and apart from, the community he depicts in the poem. More recently, critics such as Kirsti Bohata and Steve Hendon have considered the relevance of postcolonial theory in readings of Lewis's work, as well as Lewis's complex status as an 'insider-outsider': a writer both British and Welsh, at odds with the English class-system embodied by military hierarchy, believing in democratic and socialist egalitarianism, yet serving as a colonial officer in the crown jewel of the British Empire, sympathising with but distrusted by the Indian populace. This complex position strengthens feelings of dislocation and ambivalence in Lewis's poetry, as well as a conflicted desire to maintain and escape hierarchies.

Language and form: 'The Mountain over Aberdare'

Lewis's poems often mix predominantly plain language with more heightened and sophisticated diction and colloquialisms, resulting in a register which suggests the mixed feelings and mixed status of the speaker. This is evident in Lewis's 'The Mountain over Aberdare', in which predominantly plain language is broken up by the occasional use of colloquial and more formal terminology.

The speaker's status as an insider-outsider is established in the opening lines:

> From this high quarried ledge I see
> The place for which the Quakers once
> Collected clothes, my father's home,
> Our stubborn bankrupt village sprawled

The opening lines simultaneously emphasise the poet's individuality, his separateness from his father and his village, as well as his own belonging to this place through subtle use of pronouns – we move from the first-person "I" to the increasingly possessive "my father's" and "our". The speaker is stood at a remove, initially identifies the village as belonging to his father, before attaching it to himself. Lewis further grounds the poet within the community of the poem through the use of colloquial language such as "cwm" and "scrutting":

> The drab streets strung across the cwm,
> Derelict workings, tips of slag
> The gospellers and the gamblers use
> And children scrutting for the coal
> That winter dole cannot purvey;

"Cwm", the Welsh word for valley, and "scrutting", a term for picking scraps of coal, demonstrating the poet's local and intimate knowledge of the community. But the poet's more sophisticated register emphasises his educational and class difference to the predominantly poor community: "purvey" provides a marked contrast with the previous colloquial language, implying that the poet's distance is not just physical, but is also social.

Lewis uses a semantic field which emphasises the village's poverty: "bankrupt", "jaded", "drab", "derelict", "dole", "cheap-jack". Another semantic field reinforces the effects of poverty by emphasising vulnerability: "sprawled", "strung", "stretched", "tiny", "creaking", "brittle", "cracked". The description of the "tiny funeral" taking place in the village highlights the poet's detachment: the funeral is tiny not only because of the poet's vantage point in the hills, but because those same hills are also "nameless". The poet's position is therefore one which grants him a broad perspective which ranges beyond the human:

I watch the clouded years
Rune the rough foreheads of these moody hills,
This wet evening, in a lost age.

The poet suggests that the village's vulnerability is not just economic but that it is also universal and spiritual – the funeral is therefore "tiny" because, in the grand passage of time witnessed by the hills, human life pales into insignificance. The hills around Aberdare do, in fact, have names – but, perhaps because the names are in Welsh or for another reason, they are unknown to the persona in the poem.[8] This highlights the sense of alienation within the text, compounding ways the speaker is both attached to and removed from this locality. The poem's concerns are not just material and economic, but they are also spiritual. Spiritual and economic betrayal are suggested by the presence of "gospellers and gamblers" in the village, as well as by the women who "hug / Huge grief, and anger against God." Lewis directly alludes to Judas in the second stanza through "thirty pieces of silver", again demonstrating the connections between the economic failure of this village and a sense of spiritual betrayal.

While the poem contains no rhyme, Lewis's use of sound and alliteration is notable. The repeated use of sibilance with "streets strung across" and "stretched like a sow beside the stream" slows the emphasis of the lines, heightening the underlying vulnerability of the sprawling village. Clever use of consonance and plosives in "stubborn bankrupt village" underscores not only the harsh economic circumstances, but also points to the village's resistance to its fate. Similarly, Lewis's use of consonance and plosives in the hard g's of "gospellers and gamblers" emphasises the connection between the two groups and the deeper malaise they represent within the poem. This strategy is repeated with "hug / Huge grief, and anger against God." Indeed, even at the outset of the poem, Lewis uses consonance to connect the spiritual and the material: "the Quakers once / Collected clothes".

Formally, the poem appears plain on the page, but the break in the two stanzas demonstrates a significant shift in the action of the poem and a shift in the poet's perspective, and therefore a shift in the emphasis of his line of thought. The first stanza ends in "a curtained parlour" with the women's "anger against God", foreshadowing the poet's increasingly limited sight (the "curtained" parlour is not a space he can see) as well as the increasingly spiritual tone of the poem. Dusk falls as the second, shorter stanza begins, further limiting the poet's sight, leading to an emphasis on hearing and sound over sight. The dusk obscures the village's poverty and the poet's limited vision (and the encroachment of the non-human) is implied through the "white frock that floats down the dark alley", which looks like Christ. Unable to properly describe the sights, the poet emphasises what he hears: the colliers listen to a story and "the clink of coins" sounds in the lane. This inability to connect with and witness the human community of the village leads to the speaker's embrace of the anthropomorphised ("moody") hills in the final lines, emphasising the poet's status as an insider-outsider: even as he tries to embrace the non-human, the natural, and eternal, the poet cannot help but render it in human terms.

8 Some of the names can be viewed on historical maps of the area. See: https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/place/23846.

Themes

> "although I'm more engrossed with the single poetic theme of Life and Death, for there doesn't seem to be any question more directly relevant than this one, of what survives of all the beloved, I find myself 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."[9]

Life & Death

Lewis wrote 'All day it has rained' while training with the Royal Engineers at Longmoor, Hampshire. The area was intimately connected to Edward Thomas, whose former home Lewis visited while in the area. Lewis admired Thomas's poetry and felt a strong personal affinity with him, and visited his grave in 1940. In some senses, 'All day it has rained' can be regarded as both a response to Thomas's 'Rain', as well as a poem which is characteristic of Lewis's writing: it is observant, detailed, and realistic, the features which have led to his work being regarded as 'authentic', but it is also romantic and spiritual. The theme of life and death, and the inter-connectedness of the two, runs throughout.

The language of the poem suggests the key theme of life and death; the register is spectral and ghostly. From "the first grey wakening" of the third line, the rain adopts a haunting quality. This association between rain and a state of unreality is emphasised at the end of the first stanza:

> As of ourselves or those whom we
> For years have loved, and will again
> To-morrow maybe love; but now it is the rain
> Possesses us entirely, the twilight and the rain.

The rain "possesses" the soldiers and is combined with the state of "twilight", emphasising a form of haunting which runs throughout the poem. Further words bring to mind the sense of haunting and surveillance: "remember", "brooded", "watched", "followed". The constant rainfall creates an atmosphere of spiritual contemplation as well as of blurred boundaries: this a "grey wakening" and it is "twilight", a state between connected extremes of light and dark, of life and death. It also represents a collision between the spiritual and the material: the physical rain combines with the abstract twilight. While the rain has created this spectral and morose atmosphere, and it forces the scenario which leads to the soldiers' brooding speculation (unable to do anything else, they wonder if they will see their loved ones again), it also, in its relentless torrent, forces the soldiers' attention into the present moment ("now it is the rain"). The rain is both ghostly and a physical presence, over-riding the other thoughts and concerns the soldiers have.

On the surface level the poem captures the minutiae of a slow Sunday in a military training camp. The mundanity of bored men whiling away a rainy Sunday afternoon is juxtaposed against the calamity of war:

9 Excerpt from a letter from Alun Lewis to Robert Graves, quoted by Greg Hill in 'Alun Lewis – the war, darkness and the search for poetic truth' (*Critical Survey*, 2.2 (1990) pp. 216-222).

> And we talked of girls, and dropping bombs on Rome,
> And thought of the quiet dead and the loud celebrities
> Exhorting us to slaughter, and
> the herded refugees;

The soldiers' conversation marks an extreme spectrum from life to death with nothing in-between; from discussing their sweethearts to "dropping bombs on Rome", to the stark contrast between the "quiet dead" and "the loud celebrities" encouraging the violence. In Lewis's poetry, the implicit question is posed when life and death are considered: what survives, what outlasts this moment? The juxtapositions end with the "herded refugees", the survivors of the slaughter the soldiers are encouraged to undertake, and they provide one answer to the implicit question.

The last seven lines provide another answer to this question, as the poet falls into memory and recalls his visit to Edward Thomas's grave at Steep. Like the soldiers, who think of girls and dropping bombs, "Edward Thomas brooded long / on death and beauty – till a bullet stopped his song." The association between Thomas and the poet is hinted at earlier in the poem. For much of the poem, the collective identity of the soldiers dominates, but the poet takes on an individual identity when he writes, implying the connection with Thomas, his fellow soldier-poet: "I saw a fox / And mentioned it in the note I scribbled home". It is this individual voice which breaks through again in the final seven lines, but it is undermined by the connection to the doomed Edward Thomas. This erosion of identity throughout the poem is another form of death: the soldiers are subsumed into a collective identity and the only way the poet can articulate an individual identity is by recalling a pilgrimage to another soldier's grave. There is, however, an element of irony in these final lines which points to the inter-connected nature of life and death, as well as to Lewis's questions around memory and survival. While a bullet "stopped the song" of Edward Thomas, Lewis's invocation of him guarantees that Thomas lives on through "song" (poetry). Ironically, by memorialising Thomas's death, Lewis grants him a form of life.

'Goodbye',[10] a poem written by Thomas in the autumn of 1942 following his departure for India, contains similar connections between life and death, as well as between the material and the spiritual. It would be a useful point of thematic comparison. While the title and some of the language of the poem have the deathly connotations of a final parting, Lewis wrote the poem after promising he would return to his wife in a letter dated October 27th, 1942:

> And all the time, because the world is round, I am coming back to you – and what seems a long way, Gweno, is not far to go. Wait for me. I'm coming.[11]

Death is suggested by language such as "as lovers go, for ever", "make an end of lying down together", and "mummy-cloths of silence". While the poem establishes the eternal and spiritual nature of this relationship, it is, in its opening and closing stanzas, grounded in the physical and the authentic: the lovers "pack and fix on labels" in the first stanza and the speaker puts "a final shilling in the gas" in the second stanza. Finally, their love outlasts

10 A detailed discussion of this poem written by Siriol McAvoy is available at https://www.swansea.ac.uk/crew/gcse-resources/gcse-resources-2020/alun-lewis-goodbye/

11 Quoted by John Pikoulis in *Alun Lewis: A Life*, p. 139. The letter is printed in full in *Alun Lewis: Letters to my Wife* (Seren, 1989), pp. 263-264.

this parting thanks to material objects:

Yet when all's done you'll keep the emerald
I placed upon your finger in the street;
And I will keep the patches that you sewed
On my old battledress tonight, my sweet.

An emerald ring and a patched-up uniform provide two contrasting physical reminders of the lovers' time together. Like the poet's memory of his physical journey to Edward Thomas's grave, the material world imparts permanence on the spiritual and the romantic.

Light & Dark

As might be apparent from 'Mountain over Aberdare' and 'All day it has rained', Lewis's poetry often features the interplay between light and dark – the dusk of the former poem is significant, as is twilight in the latter. Lewis uses these ambiguous states to suggest both physical and metaphysical light and dark, as well as the possibilities which lie beyond the human, and the attachment of life to death.

'A Welsh Night' depicts a Welsh village at night-time during the early stages of the Second World War. In some respects, it is a gentle poem, suggesting warm memories of the home front, possibly written as Lewis was on a troop ship en route to India. The poem provides a useful point of contrast with 'Mountain over Aberdare'. In the former poem, the distance between the poet's vantage point in the hills and his home community is difficult to bridge, especially as dusk encroaches on the poem, but in 'A Welsh Night' there is a greater, less difficult sense of familiarity and belonging. The interplay of light and dark is established in the imagery of the opening lines:

> Fine flame of silver birches flickers
> Along the coal-tipped misty slopes
> Of old Garth mountain who tonight
> Lies grey as a sermon of patience
> For the threadbare congregations of the anxious.

Light, suggested by the "Fine flame of silver birches flickers", is immediately juxtaposed with the "coal-tipped misty slopes". The personification of "old Garth mountain" emphasises warmth and familiarity, as well as suggesting a natural world outside human experience. In this poem, the mountain is a comforting backdrop rather than a "nameless" hill. The diction used to describe the mountain serves us as a reminder of the religious nature of Welsh life, as well as the anxious climate of the time, as the mountain provides "a sermon of patience" for the "congregation of the anxious".

The darkness deepens as the poem progresses, and the source of the anxiety – the war – is clearly present:

> Huddled in black-out rows the streets
> Hoard the hand-pressed human warmth
> Of families round a soap-scrubbed table;
> Munition girls with yellow hands
> Clicking bone needles over khaki scarves,

If Lewis's poetry depicts the interplay of seemingly contrasting forces, then these lines are a reminder that the home is now the home front, another theatre of war. The houses "blacked out" to try and avoid the attention of enemy bombers, and within those homes attempts at domestic normalcy are undercut by the "Munition girls" making "khaki scarves". The abnormal circumstances of the home front, of domesticity disrupted and undermined, are emphasised by the lack of secure male figures – there are schoolboys, but there's "no man in the house to clean the grate". If darkness represents the ominous threat of war, and the need to hide, then light symbolises home and resistance:

> Yet everywhere through cracks of light
> Faint strokes of thoughtfulness feel out
> Into the throbbing night's malevolence,
> And turn its hurt to gentler ways.

The domestic rituals performed around a "soap-scrubbed table" are the "cracks of light" which shine through the black-out. While the black-out is ominous and enforced, it provides the security for domestic life and light to continue "gentler ways". As with Lewis's attitude to the physical and spiritual, or life and death, light and dark are intimately connected.

Every line of the short, second stanza is encoded with multiple meanings:

> Hearing the clock strike midnight by the river
> This village buried deeper than the corn
> Bows its blind head beneath the angelic planes,
> And cherishing all known or suffered harm
> It wears the darkness like a shroud or shawl.

The clock striking midnight is both ordinary and ominous, while the village "buried deeper than the corn" represents both the threat of destruction and the promise of eventual renewal. Finally, the simile of "like a shroud or shawl" reinforces the poem's central thematic idea: darkness is both the threat of death, as well as a cover for the light of domestic life.

'The Sentry' provides a useful counterpoint to 'A Welsh Night', while also reinforcing the themes discussed so far. Throughout the poem the poet expresses a fascination with the darkness, as an unnamed sentry watches over landscape which is more internal than external. It is a sombre poem which sounds notes of inevitability and again overtly considers the ways life and death are linked: "I have begun to die", asserts the opening line. Death begins in life. Night and dark throughout the poem are associated with oblivion and complete loss of being – the sentry does not even dream at night. Whereas in previous poems darkness is either partially mitigated by light (dusk and twilight, for example), or broken by "cracks of light", darkness and the capitalised "Night" are all encompassing: "there is no escape", the poet warns us. This association of darkness with death is strengthened by allusions to the Armistice that ended the First World War: Lewis invokes "the guns' implacable silence" as well as the "folded poppy", images which recall both Armistice Day itself as well as efforts to memorialise it. The sentry has begun to die, and the implication here is that the Night which awaits is the same as that which greeted a previous generation of soldiers. As with his invocation of Edward Thomas in 'All day it has rained', Lewis fixates on the memory that outlasts death as much as death itself, undermining the notion of death as a fixed, final ending.

While 'A Welsh Night' demonstrates a clear connection to home, 'The Sentry' actively rejects home and attachment in favour of embracing darkness:

> I have left
> The lovely bodies of the boy and girl
> Deep in each other's placid arms;
> And I have left
> The beautiful lanes of sleep
> That barefoot lovers follow to this last
> Cold shore of thought I guard.

The sentry has rejected romance as well as domestic space. In its place, the Sentry embraces a "black interim" which is his "youth and age"; the darkness is an unavoidable, timeless destiny. While it might be tempting to suggest that the darkness is nihilistic, the language the poet uses to articulate his turn to night is overtly romantic; this is an acceptance which is almost like the consummation of a new relationship. Relatedly, the "folded poppy" does not just recall the red poppy; it is also an allusion to the Romantic poet John Keats and, specifically, his ode 'To Autumn', which is often interpreted as a meditation on death. Rather than a nihilistic death-wish, we might view the sentry's embrace of the darkness as an attempt to come to terms with the cost of soldiering.

Beauty/the Beloved

One of Lewis's key concerns in his poetry are the ways in which love and beauty survive beyond the present moment. Beauty, and the figure of the beloved, recur in his poetry.

As discussed above, 'Goodbye' is a tender, loving and even fairly minimalist interpersonal address from the persona to his lover. The poet grounds their relationship in the everyday at the outset of the poem, but then begins to frame it in eternal and transcendent terms as the poem goes on. The penultimate stanza shifts to the level of grandeur, even hyperbole:

> We made the universe to be our home,
> Our nostrils took the wind to be our breath,
> Our hearts are massive towers of delight,
> We stride across the seven seas of death.

The eternal beauty which outlasts their physical time together does not rest solely in the poet's lover; it is the product of their relationship, as emphasised by the repeated shared identity ("We" and "Our") in this stanza. In asserting the immortality of their love, the poet has adopted the imagery of the non-human, deifying the lovers. Earlier in the poem, the non-human and the natural is used to proscribe beauty to the poet's beloved:

> I put a final shilling in the gas,
> And watch you slip your dress below your knees
> And lie so still I hear your rustling comb
> Modulate through the autumn in the trees.

The sibilance ("slip", "dress", "knees", "still", "rustling", "trees") emphasises the sensuality to these lines, while the metaphor and natural imagery marks the poem's turn to the natural, non-human and spiritual. By implication, beauty as Lewis conceives it is something beyond the human, but which is ultimately articulated through the human. As noted above, it is the material – the emerald and the patched uniform – which ultimately testify to the lasting beauty of this relationship. There is also a note of humour and humility in that final stanza. Similar ideas are articulated in the final stanza of 'Raider's Dawn':

> Blue necklace left
> On a chair
> Tells that Beauty
> Was startled there.

A necklace in the wreckage is the last symbol of Beauty surviving the present calamity, in a short poem which sweeps from the Biblical and eternal before once again settling on the surviving material detritus. 'War-Wedding' provides a useful point of comparison with the two previous poems, with a more complex and fraught attitude towards beauty and the beloved.

Alienation

Alienation is present across Lewis's poems. In the above selection, 'The Mountain over Aberdare' provides an obvious example: the poet remains in the hills, attempting to isolate themselves from the community they observe, while their alienation – a lack of a stable sense of self – is further implied through the poem's mixed registers and more overtly articulated at the end of the poem. Similarly, the poet's identity being subsumed into their battalion and haunted (or even possessed) by Edward Thomas in 'All day it has rained' provides another example of alienation in Lewis's poetry, as does the poet's decision to abandon the human in favour of darkness and Night in 'The Sentry'.

If much of Lewis's poetry ultimately tries to articulate what it is that survives death and calamity, and points to the power

of the material and of memory to enable that survival, then 'The Jungle' provides a troubling contrast. Written towards the end of Lewis's life, it is tempting – but simplistic – to read it as a suicidal confession, or as the triumph of the death-wish. Instead, the poem might best be considered as culmination of Lewis's writing up to that point, and a testament to the ways in which soldiering and India challenged, troubled and expanded his viewpoint. The poem begins near a "stagnant pool" visited by a group of soldiers and the poem's imagery is redolent with waste and decline: the pool's "grey bed black swollen leaf / Holds Autumn rotting like an unfrocked priest". Natural decay is combined with a lack of social or religious faith through the simile "like an unfrocked priest". The soldiers stop at this pool to "quench more than our thirst – our selves", an indication again of Lewis combining material circumstance with metaphysical contemplation. More than a place of rest, this stagnant pool is seemingly a place of alienation:

> And all fidelities and all doubts dissolve,
> The weight world a bubble in each head,
> The warm pacts of the flesh betrayed,
> By the nonchalance of a laugh,
> The green indifference of this sleep.

Attempting to quench their selves – their identities – at this stagnant pool, the soldiers instead see all their attachments, positive or negative, "dissolve". Their connections to other humans, "The warm pacts of flesh", are "betrayed", while the pool offers them "The green indifference of this sleep". The escape from the human is seemingly more final in the jungle than in the other spaces of Lewis's poetry, and soldiers choose an absence of bonds over existing identities.

Specifically, the human world they have left behind is that of the industrialised West, the world of "mines and offices and dives", with "sidestreets of anxiety and want", and "Huge cities known and as distant as the stars". All of these spaces are "Wheeling beyond our destiny and hope". Lewis's vision is expansive and panoptic, grander than the hill-top perspectives of 'Mountain over Aberdare' or 'A Welsh Night', but what it sees is dehumanised, impoverished, and extraordinarily remote – beyond even "destiny and hope". Partially this is due to their being stationed abroad; extreme physical distance from home leads to feelings of alienation. Beyond this, in the final stanza of the second section, Lewis argues that the soldiers have chosen to leave that world behind: "we who dream beside this jungle pool / Prefer the instinctive rightness of the poised / Pied kingfisher deep darting for a fish / To all the banal rectitude of states". Having forsaken their existing attachments when they arrived at the pool, the poet's alienation is compounded and actively strengthened by his memories of the urban, human West he left behind. Abandoning "the banal rectitude of states" means rejecting political and social order.

Indeed, the poet's alienation from his fellow humans deepens as the poem progresses and in the third section it becomes more personal:

> The black spot in the focus grows and grows:
> The vagueness of the child, the lover's deep
> And inarticulate bewilderment,
> The willingness to please that made a wound,
> The kneeling darkness and hungry prayer;

The failures and flaws of the human aren't just economic or political, they are an intrinsic part of the self, from childhood through adulthood – even good intentions "wound", the poet concludes. There is, within the self, "a greater enmity", suggesting that the poet cannot reconcile with the human. Indeed, the third section continues and moves through the vast geography of

India, before offering an apologetic note to those who maintain faith in the poet:

> Oh, those who want us for ourselves,
> Whose love can start the snow-rush in the woods
> And melt the glacier in the dark coulisse,
> Forgive this strange inconstancy of soul,
> The face distorted in a jungle pool
> That drowns its image in a mort of leaves.

The self is already submerged beneath the stagnant pool, an idea reinforced in this stanza with an allusion to Narcissus drowning himself in the pool (an allusion which also suggests the vanity of the poet's tortured introspection in this poem). Lewis associated death with the dark and the cold, and redemptive notes are sounded here, in the form of those who would "melt the glacier in the dark coulisse"; those who would restore warmth, humanity and beauty to the poet. Again, though, this introspection is undercut somewhat by an implicit acknowledgement of the poet's vanity: "coulisse" is a theatrical term. Combined with the allusion to Narcissus, this suggests that, for all the alienation the poet professes, it is in some senses an insecure performance. Ultimately, though, the poet fails to find purpose or direction, and so continues to turn to nature and the non-human in their state of alienation.

There is briefly, in the final stanza, the emergence of a more active and potentially less-alienated persona:

> And sudden as the flashing of a sword
> The dream exalts the bowed and golden head
> And time is swept with a great turbulence,
> The old temptation to remould the world.

Romantic and heroic imagery interrupts the poet's dream, but ultimately this heroic, active persona is simply "The old temptation to remould the world": an aspect of the past, rejected in 'The Jungle'. Indeed, it is tempting to here to see the desires Lewis had for his career as a poet, which led to the Caseg Broadsheets and his decision to join the armed forces. The alienation the poem contains is as much a distance from civilization as it is a distance from an old, lost idea of self, encapsulated in that "lost temptation to remould the world". The poem therefore articulates both a loss of faith in a personal mission as well as in the broad structures of the human world.

As noted at the outset of this analysis, it is tempting but perhaps too simple to read this poem as a suicidal confession. The poem ends, not with a statement or acceptance, but with questions:

> Then would some unimportant death resound
> With the imprisoned music of the soul?
> And we become the world we could not change?
> Or does the will's long struggle end
> With the last kindness of a foe or friend?

These final questions do not ask for, or accept death, but rather they ask what death brings; they ask, in some senses, a more complex version of the question Lewis often asks: what survives, and what outlives this moment? Does death part us from conscience, from alienation, from the struggle to connect to one another? Or does the soul join "the world we could not change"? Does Lewis join the world – and is he remembered, the way he remembers Edward Thomas, even though "a bullet stopped his song"?

Suggested Exercises

a) Group-reading/ Blow-up

Suggested poem: 'The Mountain Over Aberdare'

This is an introductory exercise which can be used to give students more confidence in their close-reading skills, preferably at an early point in their study of the writer.

Provide students with a handout of eight to ten consecutive lines from the poem on A3 paper, with plenty of blank space for annotation. The key point of this exercise is to isolate a smaller selection of the text, then allow the students to resituate it and apply what they learn to the whole poem later in the class.

Give the class five minutes to make some observations about the sample, inviting them to jot down their thoughts or underline what they see as important or puzzling aspects of the text. It might help to show them a previously annotated copy, so it's clear they have freedom to mark the poetry as they see fit.

Ask a student to read the text aloud, slowly and loudly. Immediately after they have finished their reading, ask a second student to do the same thing. Give the whole class another 5 minutes to make further observations and annotations on their handouts. When time is up, invite each student to share one of their observations (this might be a simile or metaphor, a rhyme scheme, an interesting or difficult word/phrase).

If students need more guidance, specific questions will help:

Who is speaking? To who? How do you know?

Do any words repeat? What kinds of words and sentences are used?

Is there a rhyme scheme? Are there other formal features?

Once you've completed this part of the class, you can now invite the group (as a whole, or in sub-groups, depending on the number of students) to examine the poem as a whole. They should be encouraged to share and discuss their initial findings at this stage and to use it as the basis of a close-reading of the whole poem.

The exercise should emphasise two things. Firstly, the way that a spoken performance of a text can alter our understanding of it: different people will approach the diction, pacing and cadence of text in different ways, and hearing it spoken aloud might reveal clues about the tone or atmosphere of the text which in turn influences analysis. It gives students the opportunity to learn from one another's approach.

Secondly, removing part of the text and putting it back into the whole makes students more aware of the composite parts of a poem. Encourage them to follow punctuation, so that they realise the difference between a line of poetry and a sentence in poetry. Students will be more alive to the fact that part of close-reading involves taking a text to pieces, while remaining aware of its wider context, i.e. how these pieces function as a whole. Being asked to 'make sense' of a whole poem can be intimidating, and more sense emerges once students learn to approach shorter pieces as well as the whole. Sharing their initial notes and encouraging group work will also make the process collaborative, encouraging collective work and confidence as a group at an early stage.

b) New Title

Suggested poem: any, though it would work better with longer poems. Alternatively, you could introduce students to the exercise with the use of a short poem before returning to the exercise in the future with a different, longer poem.

This exercise is best used at a later stage in the study of the poet, once the students are more confident with the themes and style of the poetry, and once they have a good understanding of several individual poems. It can be a more light-hearted and creative exercise, designed to get students to think outside of the box, or it could be set as homework to encourage students to reflect on their knowledge of the poetry up to a certain point in time.

You will ask students to choose a new title for a poem (or poems) they are studying. This can be open-ended – especially if you are confident the students are familiar with the poems and the broader themes they are studying – or you can provide instructions which guide or challenge the students, e.g.

- the new title of the poem can only be a single word
- the new title of the poem must be a phrase from within the poem
- the new title must be a noun/adjective/verb
- the new title must be figurative language from the poem (a simile or metaphor)

There are several approaches you can take after completing this part of the exercise. You can simply ask the students which new title they chose for the poem (or poems) and then list them on the board for all to see, and to encourage students to think about why the class made particular choices. Asking students to choose a single word as the new title could lead to a broader discussion about themes, while asking students to choose a quotation from the poem could lead to a close-reading and discussion of that particular part of the poem. Depending on the confidence of the students, you might want to ask them to justify their new title: how and why does their new title fit the poem?

The primary goal here is to encourage students to see that poems are artificial and constructed: deliberate choices have been made during the writing of the poem (and we also make deliberate choices as we interpret poems). It also teaches students about our priorities during close-reading: what images, words or themes did they prioritise? What seemed most important in understanding the poem? Ultimately, by choosing a new title for a poem, students make a decision about what is significant or important in a poem and how they think it should be understood. It also provides another opportunity for students to learn from one another, by demonstrating the different ways they've come to understand a poem.

Further Reading

Biographical & historical sources:

John Pikoulis, *Alun Lewis: A Life* (Bridgend, Seren: 1991). This critical biography of Alun Lewis is detailed, highly informative and contains insightful links between the biography, letters and poetry.

Alun Lewis: Letters to my Wife (Bridgend, Seren: 1989). Edited by Gwenno Lewis, this volume compiles a large number of letters. Lewis's correspondence is worthwhile for its literary value as much as its biographical and contextual value.

Roger Turvey, *Depression, war and recovery in Wales and England, 1930-1951*. Concise and freely available overview of the economic climate of the 1930s: **http://resource.download.wjec.co.uk.s3.amazonaws.com/vtc/2013-14/History/Depression/Part_1%20Dep.pdf**

Scholarly essays on the poetry:

John Pikoulis, 'The Two Voices in Alun Lewis's Poetry 1940-42', *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays*, volume 1 (1995) pp. 40 – 51.

John Pikoulis, 'Alun Lewis and the Politics of Empire', *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays*, volume 8 (2003) pp. 157 – 179.*

Peter Kerry Morgan, 'The Exilic Self: A Comparative Examination of the Poetry of Keith Douglas and Alun Lewis', *International Journal of Welsh Writing in English*, volume 3 (2015) pp. 48 – 74.

M. Wynn Thomas & Tony Brown, 'Colonial Wales and Fractured Language', *Nations and Relations: Writing across the British Isles* (Cardiff: New Welsh Review, 2000) pp. 71 – 88.

John Pikoulis's essay 'Alun Lewis and the Politics of Empire' is a response to the Thomas and Brown chapter from *Nations and Relations*. Pikoulis's essay also contains a brief response to his points by Thomas and Brown.

Peter Kerry Morgan's essay is an adaptation from his doctoral thesis, which is available in full here: **https://orca.cf.ac.uk/69065/12/PKM%20Final%20PDF%20Approved%20Thesis%20for%20hardbinding.pdf**

Supplementary reading online:

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