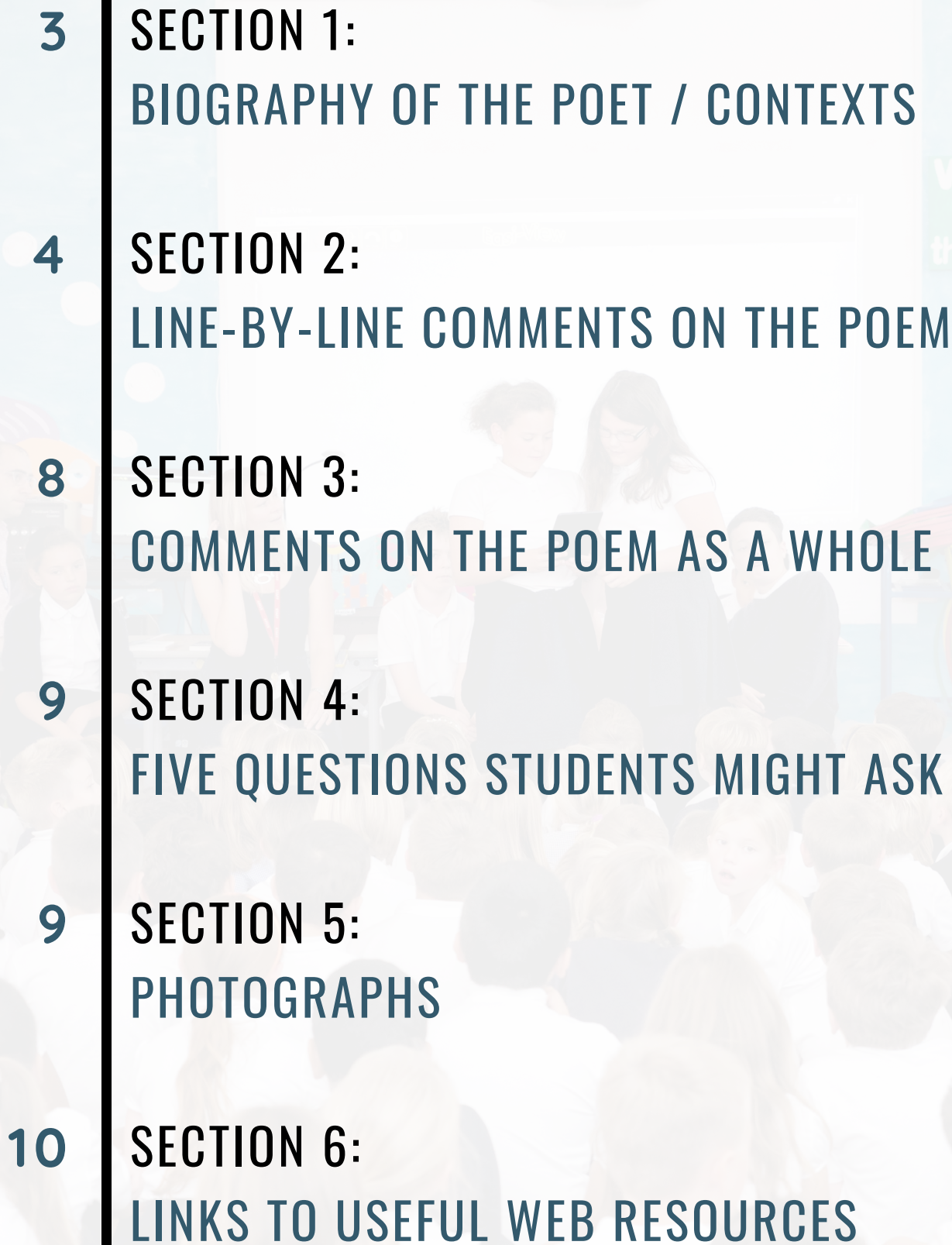


# Owen Sheers

## 'Eclipse'

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.)**

Owen Sheers is an author, poet and playwright, who was born in Suva, Fiji, in 1974, and was brought up, from the age of nine, in the village of Llanddewi Rhydderch, near Abergavenny. He read English at New College, Oxford and then went on to study an MA in Creative Writing at University of East Anglia, under the former poet laureate Andrew Motion. Sheers has published two poetry collections, *The Blue Book* in 2000 and *Skirrid Hill* in 2005. The former title is a reference to government papers that were published in 1847 to report on the state of education in Wales; the latter makes reference to the landscape of the Black Mountains where Sheers grew up. Having been shortlisted for the Wales Book of the Year award for *The Blue Book* in 2000, Sheers went on to win the award in 2005 for his debut prose work *The Dust Diaries* (2004).

In 2009, Sheers published *A Poet’s Guide to Britain* following a six-part series about poetry and the landscape that he had written and presented for BBC 4. This anthology highlighted the relationship between poetry and place, mirroring the emphasis that Sheers puts on place within his own works, particularly when he writes about the Welsh landscape as he often does in his earlier poetry.

Sheers’s work has examined Welsh society, culture, and history, yet he describes himself ‘as a writer from Wales, rather than being a Welsh writer’.[1] In 2012, he was appointed as the Welsh Rugby Union’s first writer in residence, following which he published *Calon: A Journey to the Heart of Welsh Rugby*. Combining writing and rugby, Sheers described the role as his ‘perfect job’[2] – he was himself a former scrum half for Gwent County. In 2016 he wrote *The Green Hollow*, a ‘film-poem’ commemorating the 50th anniversary of the 1966 Aberfan disaster.

Sheers is currently Professor of Creativity at Swansea University.

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(1) ‘Owen Sheers Interview’, *Poetry Archive* [online]. Available at:

<https://www.poetryarchive.org/interview/owen-sheers-interview> (Accessed 28 August 2018).

(2) ‘WRU’s artist in residence Owen Sheers talks of his “dream job”’, *WalesOnline*, 11 February 2012. Available at:

<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/lifestyle/showbiz/wrus-artist-residence-owen-sheers-2035770> (Accessed 28 August 2018).

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Title.

'Eclipse' comes from Owen Sheers's debut poetry collection *The Blue Book* (2000), and the title is ambiguous both in terms of content and grammar. We do not know whether this is the noun eclipse, which refers to the natural phenomenon, or the verb eclipse, gesturing to something (a person? A relationship?) that has been overshadowed. However, the imagery of dark and light is immediately evoked, both literally and figuratively - in terms of the 'monochrome' effect of a natural eclipse and idiomatically as in 'being kept in the dark' or 'seeing the light'.

Upon reading the poem, we learn that Sheers is using both forms of 'eclipse'. The poem dramatises the speaker's realisation that (he?) has been usurped by a new lover. This realisation mirrors the gradual movement of the natural eclipse that is being witnessed throughout the poem. One is not supposed to look directly at an eclipse, so the metaphor effectively suggests the speaker's inability (or refusal?) at the beginning of the poem to accept that the relationship is over. Like facing the eclipse, it is difficult for him to face the truth.

## Form.

The poem is structured as a series of seven couplets and a final one-lined stanza, emphasising the transition of the speaker from a state of togetherness to separation. Sheers uses a series of end-stopped lines throughout the poem, except for stanza 4 where the full eclipse occurs and the speaker realises that there is something '**between us**' (line 8). The full stop marks a break between the two halves of the poem. Meanwhile, the slow pace or rhythm of the poem reflects the slow movement of the eclipse and the long time it takes the speaker to understand that the relationship is over.

## Lines 1-4.

The opening lines establish the divided physical locations of the speaker in the countryside and the addressee in the city. There is the suggestion of a couple that have been together but who are now separate: '**We watched it apart**'. This main clause begins with the first person plural 'We' to open the poem, suggesting a sense of togetherness. However, this is revoked with the speaker's use of the adverb '**apart**', indicating a separation. The couple are physically apart, but at this stage this separation could be temporary as we don't know the relationship has (already?) ended.

The use of anaphora (the use of a word referring back to a word used earlier in a text) in the opening line through the pronoun 'it' means that the reader refers back to the title for meaning, and we understand that the speaker is referring to a natural eclipse.[3] The 'it' then becomes the '**half-darkness**', and we see a transition from 'it' simply referring to the natural eclipse to something else. Could 'it' be referring to another man? This is because the 'half-darkness fall[s] over' her, which could be a reference to the idiom 'to fall for someone'. It could even refer to the shadow another person cast over her in the moonlight.

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(3) There was a rare and widely viewed solar eclipse visible from Britain in August 1999 (it was a total eclipse when viewed from the south-west coast of England).

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Lines 1-4 (continued).

We learn that something could be awry in the couple's relationship, as the speaker ponders whether it was **'my mistake'** to watch the eclipse separately. The phrase is suggestive of regret but later we wonder if it was already too late. The act of viewing the eclipse (together or apart) suggests the idea of (different) perspectives or points of view and hints at a fractured relationship.

The alignment of 'half-darkness' with **'the city'** in the opening stanza and the freedom of the **'flying'** rooks in the second stanza, a pastoral image, sets up a contrast between city and country, the geographical separation echoing the division between speaker and addressee. But although they are in separate places, both the speaker and the addressee seem to be connected by the eclipse – demonstrating an interconnectedness between humanity and nature that the poem explores throughout.

The reference to a **'spreading hand'** also suggests a spreading apart of the couple. Furthermore, this 'spreading hand' could be perceived as a metaphor for the spread of darkness across the fields. A spread-out hand could equally be seen as a gesture to stop or to stay away. Thus the darkness, with its connotations of secrecy (or idiomatically, 'being in the dark'), signifies the end of the relationship because the addressee has moved on to someone else – perhaps unbeknown to the speaker at this point.

The number three, or tripling, is suggested by the eclipse itself, due to it being an alignment of the sun, the moon and the earth. Invoking the number three could also refer to the love triangle that is present in the poem. Here, this tripling is made explicit through the rooks in these lines, whose typically 'greyish-white face[s]'<sup>[4]</sup> also enhance the dark and light imagery that is prominent throughout the poem.

## Lines 5-8.

These lines describe the moment of the eclipse in which earth, moon and sun are aligned, which seems to give the speaker some hope that the couple could be together again. However, as the eclipse passes, hope is confronted by the speaker's awareness that the relationship may be over, reinforced by the full stop at the end of line eight after the word **'us'**, grammatically putting an end to their relationship.

The use of the conjunction **'But'** also indicates a shift in the mindset of the speaker. This shift moves away from the togetherness that he had hoped for and the separateness that is a reality towards the gradual realisation that there is something **'between us'**. It is an ironic statement: 'something between us' means a relationship beyond friendship, but here it is also an allusion to the 'shadow' of the third party who has come between them.

In these lines the speaker imagines the former lovers together or **'connected again'**, which could be an effect of the eclipse. The fact that a solar eclipse gives the impression of night when it is day might allude metaphorically to the speaker being under a misapprehension concerning the relationship.

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[4] RSPB Bird A-Z, 'Rook' [online]. Available at: <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/rook/> (Accessed 28 November 2018).

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Lines 5-8 (continued).

Of course, another interpretation is that the sight of the eclipse has **'unlocked'** a memory in him, which is reinforced by the romantic image of the moon **'passing over'** them. Is he thinking about a time when they were together in the moonlight, and this image has been ignited by the eclipse? The idea that he is reflecting on a memory is enhanced through Sheers's use of alliteration – the alliterative 'm' in these lines slows the pace as the moon and earth move in direct alignment with the sun, and the intrusive 'breeze' enters the scene almost like an awakening. This gentle wind has a calming effect on the speaker as he comes to realise that all is not what it seems.

The paradoxical **'mid-day midnight'** where the eclipse makes it look like night time even though it is day could again suggest the diametrically opposed positions of the speaker and the addressee towards the relationship – with the speaker still pining after the relationship and the addressee knowing that it is over.

A line break occurs between lines seven and eight at the point where the eclipse is at its peak. This opening up of the lines creates a sense of exposure. Has he been exposed to the truth? Is he now seeing their relationship from a different perspective? The use of enjambment between lines 7 and 8 also highlights the fact that the solar eclipse is in full alignment, because it connects the 'day' (representing sunlight) in line 7, with both the moon and the couple or 'us' (who are on earth) in line 8. It also quickens the pace. Like the eclipse, perhaps the relationship was a short affair that came and went suddenly? Or, could it be alluding to the speed that it took the addressee to move on to someone else?

## Lines 9-10.

From these lines onwards to the end of the poem, the focus is on the speaker's and addressee's cooling relationship and the presence of the other man. The eclipse, like their relationship, is now in the past. A rhyming couplet is used in this stanza. Could Sheers be trying to replicate the switching on of a lightbulb, as a metaphor for the speaker's realisation, reinforced by the fact that the rhyme is **'light'** and **'night'**? This could signal a moment of sudden realisation, or it could mean that light has been shed on the truth and he is no longer in the dark, as he was during the eclipse when he recalled the memory of them together. All is not what it seems in an eclipse, where day becomes night, and this uncertainty is transferred to the status of the relationship.

## Lines 11-12.

In these lines the speaker explicitly refers to the other man. Following on from his discovery after he **'learnt'** (that the relationship is actually over) in the previous stanza, the 'half-darkness' (line 2) or the 'shadow' (line 8) has now become **'his'**. With the involvement of a third person the speaker has now become eclipsed, like the sun when the moon moves in between it and the earth.

The speaker recognises the **'cooled'** tone in the addressee's voice now that she has another person in her life. There is a distance between them, both literally, since they are speaking on the phone, and metaphorically as her language shortens or becomes **'clipped'**. Is she being careful about what she says on the phone in the presence of her new lover? Or is she now emotionally detached from the speaker and has nothing more to say? The fact that her voice becomes 'eclipsed' indicates that she is moving into the speaker's past.

# LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

## Lines 13-14.

These lines describe how the discovery that the addressee is with another man has affected the speaker. The fact he refers to **'the dream'** with the definite article signals that he has the same image in his head before going to sleep each night: that of the addressee with the other man.

Sheers once again uses a fronted conjunction (a conjunction positioned at the beginning of a sentence) in line 13 to show the after-effects that coming to terms with the ending of this relationship is having on the speaker. Instead of remembering himself with his former lover, as he did during the eclipse, his vision is now dominated by the image of her and the other man together. This vision is quite intimate and has sexual connotations; the woman's **'up-looking face'** suggests that she is lying on her back, which has been overshadowed by **'his shadow'**. The parenthetical dashes indicate the fixedness of the speaker on this vision, and emphasise how it dominates his thoughts. They also indicate a pause, which may represent the speaker's inability to move forward. The reference to **'falling'**, which is repeated in line 15, could link back to the **'fall over you'** in the opening stanza, strengthening the idea that the opening 'half-darkness' is actually symbolic of the other man.

## Line 15.

The repetition of 'his shadow' in the final line makes this the dominant image at the close of the poem. The speaker is, arguably, eclipsed. Though the final line also begins with **'his'** and ends with **'me'**, it is in the passive voice, reflecting the prominence of each man in the addressee's life. The fact that the poem begins with the first person plural, 'we', and then ends with the first person singular, 'me' symbolises the status of the speaker (once part of a couple and now alone). The solitary image of the speaker is also reflected in this the fact this is the only one-lined stanza in the entire poem.

# COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

Sheers establishes the notion of togetherness and separation through the metaphor and image of the eclipse, focusing on its gradual movement, its dark and light colouring, and its process. The theme of relationships, specifically the loss of a relationship, is pertinent when reading this poem. The poem highlights the one-sidedness of relationships when one party moves on and the other struggles to come to terms with its having ended.

Whilst the loss of a relationship may be significant, perhaps the contemplative or meditative potential within the natural world, and how it can help us to reflect on our own lives, is important too. Sheers connects the speaker with the addressee through nature (the eclipse) to showcase how they were once connected. However, he uses the same image to demonstrate how the speaker comes to realise that the relationship is over.

The interconnectedness of humanity and the natural world is commonplace in Sheers's poetry. In another of his poems from *The Blue Book*, titled 'The Pond', Sheers writes about how he takes 'things' to the pond, such as his 'grandfather's death', his 'first kiss', or his 'arguments', [5] presumably to think these things through. Thus, the notion that nature is a tool for human contemplation is worth exploring in 'Eclipse'. This interconnectedness is shown by how, though we can be miles apart physically, we are always looking at the same sun/moon and it is this which connects us to each other, even if we are looking at it from a different perspective.

Tripling is important in this poem, although it is not immediately clear why. We are first introduced to it via the eclipse, which is an alignment of the sun, the earth and the moon. As we later discover, through the references to 'mid-day' (line 7) and '**the moon's shadow**' (line 8), the poet is referring to a solar eclipse. This means that the moon is between the sun and the earth. However, we realise the significance of tripling by the end of the poem: to convey a love triangle.

Sheers may have used an eclipse because it is a rare natural phenomenon, and this successfully conveys the effect that the relationship had on the speaker; it was special, perhaps even a rare experience. Maybe the speaker feels like it will be a long time before he feels like that again.

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(5) Owen Sheers, 'The Pond', in *The Blue Book*, p. 22, l. 1, l. 4, l. 7 and l. 10.



## FIVE QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

What does the figure of the eclipse make you think of?

Aside from the eclipse, what is the most dominant image in the poem and why?

How important to the poem is the imagery of light and darkness?

Why might the poem be structured as it is? Consider the couplet, the line break in stanza 4 and final solitary line?

How does this poem show the relationship between humanity and the natural world?

## SECTION 5

(links active August 2018)

All links are clickable

## PHOTOGRAPHS

A recent picture of Owen Sheers, taken from his website:

[http://www.owensheers.co.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/owen\\_large\\_feb-15.jpg](http://www.owensheers.co.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/owen_large_feb-15.jpg)

A range of images taken of the solar eclipse in South Wales in 2015:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-31971509>

# LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

What is an eclipse?

<https://www.nasa.gov/audience/forstudents/5-8/features/nasa-knows/what-is-an-eclipse-58>

Owen Sheers's website:

<http://www.owensheers.co.uk/>

Owen's Sheers's profile on the BBC website:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/arts/sites/owen-sheers/>

British Council Literature, Owen Sheers:

<https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/owen-sheers>

Owen Sheers as a Poet in Residence at the Poetry Archive, where he talks about poetry and answers questions from members of the public:

<https://www.poetryarchive.org/poet-in-residence/23185>

Owen Sheers talks about the influence of his Welsh heritage on his writing, from the landscape to the lives of the small town boys he grew up with:

<https://www.poetryarchive.org/interview/owen-sheers-interview>

Wales Arts Review's interviews and articles on Owen Sheers:

<http://www.walesartsreview.org/?s=owen+sheers>

WJEC's exclusive interview with poet:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeB9zK1DfOo>

Twitter link:

<https://twitter.com/owensheers>



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