

SUNSET SONG - A Pupil's Guide.



N.B. The following sheets provide one person's opinions on the novel and, as such, you ought to question these opinions which are bound to be subjective. As you discuss these notes with your teacher, write down your own reactions to the self-assessed questions, and find suitable quotations to illustrate your views. Read ahead in the book to finish it quickly, and then re-read as you make up these notes.

1. GIBBON'S ACHIEVEMENT

Grassic Gibbon was part of what is known as the "Scottish Literary Revival". The nineteenth century Scottish writers are known as the "Kailyard School", from "kailyard", a cabbage-patch. The term was applied to these writers because they attempted to describe life in Scotland in a romanticised way: all that was coarse was to be eliminated, to be made respectable; and it was not to cast doubt on the character of the Scottish people. Notice that *The House with the Green Shutters* is described as a book which reacted against these ideas. Its author, George Douglas Brown, wanted to describe life as he saw it with truth and realism. (See p24)

2. THE NOVEL

- Note the titles of each section, and explain to what each refers. Collect a copy of the diagram.
- To what other cycles could this pattern refer since the book is about Kinraddie and Chris Guthrie?
- Where does each section of the book begin and end? Symbolism?

N.B. Some students find the first section - Prelude - rather difficult to get through, in comparison with the 'Song' itself which is a strong narrative about an interesting person. It *is* worth reading the Prelude again *once you have finished the book* - it will make more sense to you.

3. THE TITLE

Consider the implications of the title. What is a sunset? What does it connote? The end of the day, the end of something anyway. The author wants us to see in the novel the end of a way of life, of an age. In the Epilogue, this is stated more explicitly, and examples are given of the changes in Kinraddie. We'll look at this in more detail later. Meanwhile, just remember that sunset here refers to the death of a way of living.

And 'Song'? You will find throughout the novel references to music and singing: Prelude itself is a musical term; to Burns' songs; to '*The Flowers of the Forest*'. The latter is a lament, and I think that the novel is too, in a sense, a lament. So the title might be paraphrased as a 'lament for the end of an age'.

The word 'Song' has implications, too, for the style in which the novel is written. The language of the book will be discussed in more depth later, but as you read I would like you to notice that it is written in a kind of singing style. For instance, dialogue is not separated from the rest of the text by inverted commas as it usually is in prose writing. This means that the flow of the language is not unduly broken and the narrative is more continuous. Quote some examples from pp 19/20 to illustrate the style.

4. THEMES

In literature, a theme is a central idea that runs through a text. *Sunset Song* is a novel built around two central themes, and it is these that give the novel its richness and depth.

Main Theme 1 – A *lament for the loss of a former way of Scottish community life*, brought about by new economic forces and by the 1st World War.

Main Theme 2 – The *process of growing up to maturity* of Chris as a woman, reflected in the symbolism of the farming year cycle.

The themes are reflected in all that Grassie Gibbon writes in the novel. When you read the novel, you should keep the themes in the back of your mind. Ask yourself how the various parts of the novel relate to the themes, and that should help you come to terms with the novel.

A. PRELUDE - "The Unfurrowed Field"

In the Prelude, note the blend of history, detailed description of Kinraddie, vivid character sketches of Kinraddie folk, humour and colloquial Scots style - all designed to create a total impression of Kinraddie as a place with real roots in the past and a vigorous life in the present, typical of a rural Scottish community. Notice, also, that the author makes his intention clear in the Minister's significant remarks on p24.

Self-assessed questions:

1. After re-reading the Minister's statement on p24. try to write down what you think the author's intentions are.
2. Comment on the writing style of (a) pp.1-2; (b) pp3-5; (c) pp5-24 - complete this chart of the "nine bit places" left in the Kinraddie estate:

	NAME OF FARM	OCCUPANT(S)	COMMENT ON OCCUPANT(S)
1	The Mains		

B. PLOUGHING

Look at the description of the weather on p25. The wind 'brought more heat than cold' - this suggests an atmosphere of thundery weather - perhaps ominous in the light of what is to come. The land is dry, there has been a 'drought' - which suggests a sterile, bare landscape, not cultivated (an echo of the 'unfurrowed field' of the Prelude). Note that at the end of the section, on p.62, the weather breaks and there is a crack of lightning. *This is a dramatic moment in nature which mirrors the dramatic news Chris is about to hear.*

It also indicates the end of the drought; and this is significant because the 'ploughing' refers of course to Chris herself as well as to the land and the season. In fact the choice of title for this section is worth considering in more detail at this point. Why does the farmer plough? To prepare the land for the planting of seed. Chris is not yet mature; her character has not yet been formed. In this section we are told of her background so that we can **become aware of the influences that might shape her**. At this stage in her life, her personality is compared to an empty field waiting to be drilled and planted. Gibbon makes this explicit on p61. And he continues the metaphor with the subsequent section of the 'Song'.

The character of Chris's father seems rather contradictory, or rather Chris's feelings about him are contradictory. On the one hand, she admires his skill in farming and his attitude to the land. In his view those who work the land faithfully are 'the salt of the earth' (p.61). He is proud of what he is and what he does - notice how he stands up to the lady in the motor car (p.36) and the Minister (p.56). You ought to be considering further what kind of a man he is as you read on in the next section.

The marriage of Chris's parents begins in a romantic glow (pp.27-28) but constant childbirth has made Jean Guthrie tired and bitter against a husband who will not take steps to avoid having children (pp.28-29). This conflict between her parents is something which fascinates Chris, especially the sexual side of her father's nature, and his own attitude to it. At first, she only dimly recognises this (p.34.) and then begins to understand, although not fully (pp.60-61). There are aspects of both her parents in Chris, naturally enough. But her personality is at war in another way as well: she feels that there is a 'Scottish' and an 'English' Chris. At the end of the section, it is the 'English' side of her nature in which she is more interested - but the Scottish side has a strong pull too.

Notice the scorn with which the author regards the Scottish educated classes {teachers (pp31-32, 43-44) & ministers (pp52-56)} and consider how he presents Chae Strachan and Long Rob as representatives of new ideas (socialism?) breaking with tradition.

THE VOICE OF KINRADDIE

Throughout the novel, but especially in the Prelude and the Epilude, there is a voice which describes the people of Kinraddie and their doings. From whose point of view does this voice 'speak'? Clearly, it is not Chris - her thoughts and feelings are always made obviously hers. Nor is it the author - because some of the statements are contradictory and we do not know his opinion. Who is speaking in the last sentence in paragraph 1 on p20? It must be one of the people of Kinraddie, who remains without a name throughout the novel. But I don't mean that this is a fictional character who is never named. Rather, I mean it is a generalised voice, one that we might call the 'speak of the place' - a phrase used in the novel. This voice is sometimes censorious, sometimes approving, sometimes describing the events without comment. It is ***the voice of Kinraddie*** running throughout the novel

Self-assessed questions on PLOUGHING. pp 25 -47 -

Select a suitable extract from the novel in which you recognise this 'speak of the place' - analyse it and see if you agree with the points made in the paragraph on THE VOICE OF KINRADDIE.

Make notes on the character of:

1. John Guthrie
2. Jean Guthrie
3. Chris, explaining what you think are the characteristics of the 'Scottish' and 'English' Chris.

pp.47 -63 Make notes on -

1. Chris' developing personality
2. Chae Strachan and Long Rob as 'representatives of new ideas breaking with tradition'.
3. Gibbon's attitude to the Scots educated classes.
4. John Guthrie and Jean Guthrie.
5. Symbolism in the weather.

C. DRILLING

In this section, Chris loses her family in stages. The ominous atmosphere at the end of 'Ploughing' had foreshadowed her mother's killing of the twins and her own suicide (pp.63-4), the reasons for which become apparent on p.64. Note that the news of the deaths is withheld from the reader for a page into the section which introduces an element of suspense. Then on pp.67-8, Dod and Alec leave. Will gradually withdraws from Blawearie and finally leaves (pp.66, 76-82, 102). With her father's stroke (pp.103-4), the family has declined completely.

Another interesting development in this section is the continuation of Chris's sexual awareness. In 'Ploughing', we saw her perception of her parents' sexuality and her learning from Marget Strachan (pp.46-7). Now, as she becomes older, we see her encounter with the Tink, which makes her consider further her own appearance and sexuality. Notice that although Chris feels very ambivalent about the experience she manages to look at herself with commonsense and humour (p.71). She becomes slightly afraid of her father (72), and although she asks herself what there is to be afraid of, she really, subconsciously, knows. (The fear is made explicit later, in 'Seed-time'.) With her realisation of Mollie's feelings for her brother her awareness is further developed.

This coincides with the coming of Ewan into her life. He is first mentioned on pp.72-3 and he kisses her in the dark later on in the section (p.91). She doesn't realise that it was, in fact, him until he visits Blawearie while she is baking (pp.99-100). The reader can see that they are attracted to one another, although Chris's feelings are confused.

The theme of fire seems to be important in this section. There is the hot weather at the end of harvest, the burning of the whins, the fire at Peesie's Knapp, the 'fire' of the harvest madness including John Guthrie's

lust, the fire within Chris as she longs for love and sexual maturity, and the fiery passions of anger in Will and his father. Perhaps this prefigures the war which is to play such a large part in the story later on.

John Guthrie is again portrayed as a powerful character in this section. We notice his loss of power over Will; his scorn about the doings of Kinraddie. Notice that it is stated quite categorically on p.76 that he loved his land 'better than his soul or God' - and his attitude to other things is coloured by that. His pride and rage bring his downfall, as his struggling against his fall and subsequent weakness bring about his paralysis.

The traditional activities and occasions of this section - the gathering of the harvest, the threshing, and the celebration of New Year - illustrate the virtues of the old way of life with its neighbourliness, cooperation and friendliness, tested seriously in the attempt to save Chae Strachan's farm from fire. At the same time, we notice that people are not necessarily kind to each other all the time, and that gossip is rife in the community.

Self-assessed questions on DRILLING

pp.63 - 84. Make notes on -

1. Chris
2. John Guthrie
3. The negative and positive sides to the community of Kinraddie.

pp. 85-106. Make notes on -

1. Chris
2. John Guthrie
3. Negative and positive sides to Kinraddie
4. Ewan Tavendale.

D. SEED-TIME

The wedding itself is one of the two important rituals described in this section - the other being John Guthrie's funeral. The wedding is central to the section and worth reading again (pp.143-168). Notice that Gibbon has woven into his description a variety of traditional Scottish elements, *making the occasion stand for a culture*. In the course of it, McIvor, Ewan's best man, gives a toast which you should read again now (p.157). In this speech, Gibbon puts into the Highlander's mouth an explicit comparison of Chris and Ewan with the seasons of the land. Now that you have finished the book and know what happens to them, you can appreciate the irony of this: for the love of Chris and Ewan only really comes to fruition when Ewan is already dead - see p.241, the last sentence.

Self-assessed questions on SEED-TIME

pp.107-125. Make notes on -

1. Chris
2. John Guthrie
3. Kinraddie
4. Ewan

pp.126-168:- Make notes on -

1. Chris and her relationship with Ewan
2. The idea of human mutability
3. Kinraddie - list the main features of the wedding - what is Gibbon's purpose here?

pp.168 - 180 - Makes notes on -

1. Any clues which show how successful the marriage will be?

E. HARVEST

With the final section of the “song”, we have a harvest. In some senses this applies to the characters - the birth of young Ewan is a literal harvesting of the ‘seed’ of Chris and Ewan - in others, it applies to the effect of war on Kinraddie, its people and landscape. At first Chris and Ewan don’t realise how seriously the war will affect their lives (pp.181-190). Two markedly opposing reactions are given in the attitudes of Chae and Long Rob; and it is through Chae’s eyes that we see how the war has affected the Kinraddie community (pp.194-207).

After Ewan goes off to war, Chris shows her strength and loyalty in her helping of Long Rob in his weakness and loneliness, and after Ewan returns, brutalised by his army experiences (N.B. not by war - this is only his training period) she turns to Long Rob – perhaps because he embodies something which she needs and which Ewan cannot give. In the novel, Long Rob is associated with humour, song, scepticism about ideas and causes, moral courage and independence: and it is interesting that these are characteristics that we also associate with Chris.

However, Ewan’s death and its circumstance bring Chris face to face with the pointlessness and evil of war. Her first reaction, to retreat into semi-madness, highlights the madness of the war and the forces continuing it (pp.29-30). The loss of Ewan – and the other men who have meant so much to her – emphasises the power of war as a force destroying the worthwhile elements of a community. Ewan’s desertion from the front is an act indicating his realisation of where his true concerns lie. And Kinraddie has lost its true course and, deprived of its best men, has sunk into decay, environmental damage and selfish money-making.

Self-assessment questions on HARVEST

pp 181 - 210 - Make notes on

1. In how many senses is it a harvest? (5?)
2. Note the different reactions to the war of a. Chae b. the Minister c. Rob d. Chris.
3. Note the changes taking place in Kinraddie.

pp.210-241 - Make notes on-

1. Chris and Ewan - what is his reason for going and is it only an excuse?
2. Is Ewan’s transformation prepared for – or is it to fit the novel’s symbolic pattern?
3. p.225 - quote the simile which shows his coarsening - who has he become like, and how does this show another cycle?
4. p.238 - what are his motives for deserting?
5. p.241 - what does his return symbolise?

The character of Chris –

1. Find further evidence of Chris’ identification with the land.
2. Comment on her relationship with Rob.
3. What are the final impressions of Chris which Gibbon provides? Has he portrayed a real woman or just a symbol or has he managed to do both?

F. EPILUDE - “The Unfurrowed Field”

In the Epilude, the various strands of the song are gathered together and the decline of Kinraddie charted in terms of actual people dead or dispersed and actual farms and buildings ruined or bought over. We will discuss the standing stones later but note that it is by them that reconciliation between Chris and Ewan takes place; her past and future are linked here by the use of the stones – part of her past – as a war memorial and the sermon preached by Robert Colquhoun – who is part of her future.

The sermon of dedication restates the main theme of ‘*Sunset Song*’: the passing away of the way of life described in the sermon is accompanied by a literal lament – ‘The Flowers of the Forest’, which Chris sang so inappropriately (or perhaps not so inappropriately?) at her wedding.

Notice that the ‘voice’ of Kinraddie’s final judgement on Chris is a kindly one. The final paragraph of the

book is a tribute to Chris's strength and a hope for her future happiness. Although the ending is sad, therefore, it is not necessarily pessimistic.

Self-assessed questions on EPILUDE

Look at the sermon again (pp.255-6). It is worth looking at in some detail for the way in which it skillfully draws together the themes of the novel.

1. The second sentence deals with the land – write down the names of the characters in the novel to whom this sentence might apply.
2. “A thing older than themselves” – what does Gibbon mean by this?
3. ‘this (world) that we seem to inherit’ (near the end): give examples from the rest of the Epilude of how the ‘world’ of Kinraddie has changed. [pp.244-6]
4. Who is the main agent for communicating Gibbon's sense of dismay at these changes?
 1. In what ways is he presented positively? [see pp.252-3]
 2. What does his sermon stress as a clue to Gibbon's central theme of the book?
 3. How is the bagpipe tune played symbolic?
 4. Quote the last sentence - is this positive or negative in tone?

SOME GENERAL POINTS:

SETTING

The “setting” of any novel is where the author puts it in place and time. In some novels the setting is very important in others less so. For instance, many novels concentrate on character for their interest, and the setting is irrelevant: it is the people with whom the novelist is concerned. However, Lewis Grassie Gibbon is interested in character *and* setting.

STRUCTURE

The structure of anything is the way in which it is built up. Gibbon has clearly taken a great deal of trouble with the way that he has written *Sunset Song* and the structure is notable in two respects. First of all, he flanks his “story” – the song – by a Prelude and an Epilude, both named “The Unfurrowed Field”. This metaphor has implications for the imagery and symbolism of the book. Secondly, within the song the events of each of the sections are viewed retrospectively, each beginning with Chris at the standing stones starting to remember and ending with her going down the hill to meet the next event of her life. I should say that once we are into each section we forget that Chris is remembering, and see the events with her as if they were happening. Sometimes it is a slight shock to arrive at the end of a section to be reminded that what we just been reading is in the past, that Chris is ready once more to move on to the next part of her life. So, in a sense, we have two “frames”: the song framed by The Unfurrowed Field, and each section framed by a period of reminiscence at the standing stones.

What reasons might Gibbon have had for structuring his novel this way? He could, after all, simply have divided it into chapters, made chapter 1 his introduction to Kinraddie and its people, chapter 2 the background of the Guthrie family, and so on. He could still have had his chapter headings which refer to the land, and he could still have made the standing stones important in Chris's life.

However by framing his plot in the way he does **he makes his points more clearly**. By separating “The Unfurrowed Field” from the story of Chris he contributes structurally to his theme – the end of a way of life. And by framing the stages of her life between periods of rest at the standing stones he is showing that these – stages – chapters, metaphorically – in her life. At the same time he is emphasising the importance of stones as a symbol in the novel.

LANGUAGE

See notes on “The voice of Kinraddie” – note too the use of Scots dialect words and colloquialisms. Find examples, too, of Gibbon's vivid use of imagery in metaphors and, especially, similes to portray people and places.

THEMES

I have already stated the two major themes of the novel, however there are some secondary and subsidiary themes which I would like to mention briefly.

SECONDARY THEMES

WAR. Important both for what it does to people and also for its effect on the main theme.

THE POSITION OF WOMEN. A minor theme, but in Chris's struggles against the community's notions of what is "respectable" and her determination to run Blawearie on her own we see Gibbon's sympathy for the independent women.

LOVE OF THE LAND. Obviously this is closely related to the main theme.

RELIGION. Gibbon's hatred of the hypocrisy of some aspects of the church comes over strongly in the novel. See his portrait of Guthrie's life—denying Calvinism or his satirical portrait of the Reverend Gibbon(!). The other side is of course represented by the Reverend Colquhoun.

POLITICS. Although Gibbon does not seem to come down firmly on one side, and although part of him is clearly conservative, he obviously approves of the various forms of socialism portrayed in the novel: Strachan's ideas, Long Rob's ideas, the ploughman's union etc.

SCOTLAND. In Kinraddie Gibbon is at pains to show Scotland in miniature.

THE GOLDEN AGE. Gibbon uses various characters to illustrate the view that at one time there was such a golden era in mankind's history.

MUTABILITY. The sense that nothing human endures, that it is only the land which survives.

Find suitable quotations or examples to illustrate each of these minor themes. Are there any others you noticed which we have not mentioned?

IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM

In my discussion of the book section by section I've already mentioned the main metaphor running through the novel; that of the seasons of the land reflecting the lives and preoccupations of the characters.

Symbolically the title is important. The standing stones are also an important symbol – as those things from the past which are vital and endure. Note how Gibbon uses symbols – the standing stones, the land – to give us more idea of what his characters are like. The characters that are associated with the standing stones are those who believe in what Gibbon believes in. For instance, Robert Colquhoun is introduced to the reader very near the end of the novel, but we can have a fair idea of what the author means us to think of him from the fact that he chooses the stones as a site for the war memorial. John Guthrie hates and fears the stones – what might that tell us about him? One thought might be that he is someone who lives from day to day... Try to think of more possibilities for yourself.

CHRIS

A final word about Chris. I said that one of the points to consider about the novel was how successfully this male author has written from inside a female character. My feeling is that he does so very successfully. Many male authors view women sympathetically, and as rounded believable people. But few, in my view, have spoken *as* a woman so effectively as Gibbon does through Chris. You, especially if you are female, may wish to disagree with my view. You might pick out an incident (about pregnancy, perhaps, or childbirth) where you could argue that Chris feels how men *expect* women to feel, rather than how, in your view, women *do* really feel.

“SUNSET SONG” Revision

Organise the notes which you have made under the following two major themes, and under the nine suggested headings for the writing style.

Theme 1 – A *lament* for the loss of a former way of Scottish community life, brought about by new economic forces and by the 1st World War. Supply quotes and personal comments on each of these points.

- a. Note Gibbon’s aim in writing the book – p.24.
- b. ‘Prelude’ – how it shows a range of characters and a community.
- c. The Guthrie family, and what John and Jean show of aspects of the Scots character.
- d. Kinraddie – the negative sides.
- e. Kinraddie – the positive sides.
- f. Changes in the farming world brought about by economic forces.
- g. The destructive effects on the community of the losses in the 1st World War. Quote from the dedication sermon.

Theme 2 – The process of growing up to maturity of Chris as a woman, reflected in the symbolism of the farming year cycle.

- a. The divisions within Chris as a young girl. (pp.25 – 47).
- b. The divisions within Chris as a young woman. (pp.47 –106)
- c. Chris and her father – attitudes to him before and after the funeral. (pp.47 – 125)
- d. Chris and Ewan. (pp.126 – 241)
- e. Chris at the end – the symbolism of the standing stones and the land. (pp.210 – 241)

Characters –

Major / main character (or protagonist) – Chris Guthrie.

Minor characters – John and Jean Guthrie; Ewan; Chae; Rob; Will.

Writing Style –

- a. Paragraph explaining the novel’s deliberate structure – use the diagram to write this.
- b. Persona 1 – describe. {The Voice of Kinraddie}
Persona 2 – describe. {Chris}
- c. Language – Scots and English.
- d. Rhythm of the narrative style.
- e. Sentence structure of the narrative style.
- f. Tone varieties – find 3 variations.
- g. Figurative language – find 3 examples.
- h. Music.
- i. Setting – Kinraddie; the farming year cycle; the Standing Stones; the psychological setting within Chris’ mind.

Chapter	Chris	World
The Unfurrowed Field (Prelude)	Sets scene	History of Kinraddie
Ploughing	How Chris came to Kinraddie/ Blawearie Jean's death	Social change / 'class structure' / land use is changing...
Drilling	Coming to her womanhood/ maturing - John Guthrie's death	Ready for change... prepared. A New World Order is coming... The OLD IDEAS will no longer work...
Seedtime	Marries Ewan / pregnant Argument with Ewan	Run up to the Great War / continuing industrialisation of farming
Harvest	Runs farm / Ewan at War / kids	'Where you reap what you have sown...' The Great War / Kinraddie sends men / brutalises men, makes them inhuman.
The Unfurrowed Field (Epilude)	Memorial to the Fallen / Rev. Colquhoun & Chris	