



# ***Sunset Song* by Lewis Grassic Gibbon learning activities**

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Age 14+

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CFE Senior Phase

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Scottish Book Trust

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## About *Sunset Song*

*Sunset Song* was published in 1932. It is the story of Chris Guthrie, a resilient and hard working girl growing up in the fictional estate of Kinraddie. As she grows up Chris faces hardships and dilemmas that test her character, as she attempts to find her identity in the gossipy but ultimately close-knit community.

*Sunset Song* is considered to be a hugely important book because of (among other things) its realistic depiction of women, family life and religion in Scottish crofting communities. Gibbon also managed to use Scots dialogue in an understated way that avoided alienating a wider audience. On its release, many were shocked by Gibbon's candid views on religion, sex and incest, and his realistic and descriptive accounts of childbirth.

The book will give you great opportunities to talk about an era where life in Scotland began to change irrevocably. However, for many, the main draw of the text lies in Chris: a dignified, contemplative character who approaches challenges with pragmatism and strength.

# Basic understanding

## Learning objective:

- To identify key scenes in the text

*Sunset Song* was made into a film, released in 2016. You can [watch the trailer here](#).

Ask your pupils to act as the screenwriter by mapping out all the key moments of *Sunset Song* and creating a storyboard. Make sure they justify their selection of scenes.

Alternatively, you could ask pupils to create a tableau. As well as simply identifying key scenes, this activity can help you explore character, as the pupils justify the layout of their depictions and characters' body language and facial expressions.

Here is a [guide to creating tableaux](#).

# The theme of community

## Learning objective:

- To explore the characters in Kinraddie

The community of the village of Kinraddie is portrayed as small and tight-knit before the war. Everyone knows everyone else, and this is shown to have both good and bad aspects. It is good when people are active and occupied, much less so when they are gossiping and spinning rumours. The story evolves through community gossip and retelling - a folk narrative.

## Understanding the characters

Ask pupils to work in pairs. Each pupil should choose a different character to investigate. After each pupil has gathered together their observations about their character, ask them to share these with each other. You could ask pupils to prepare a standard set of questions to ask each other about their chosen characters.

# The theme of land

## Learning objective:

- To understand how land impacts on characters in the text

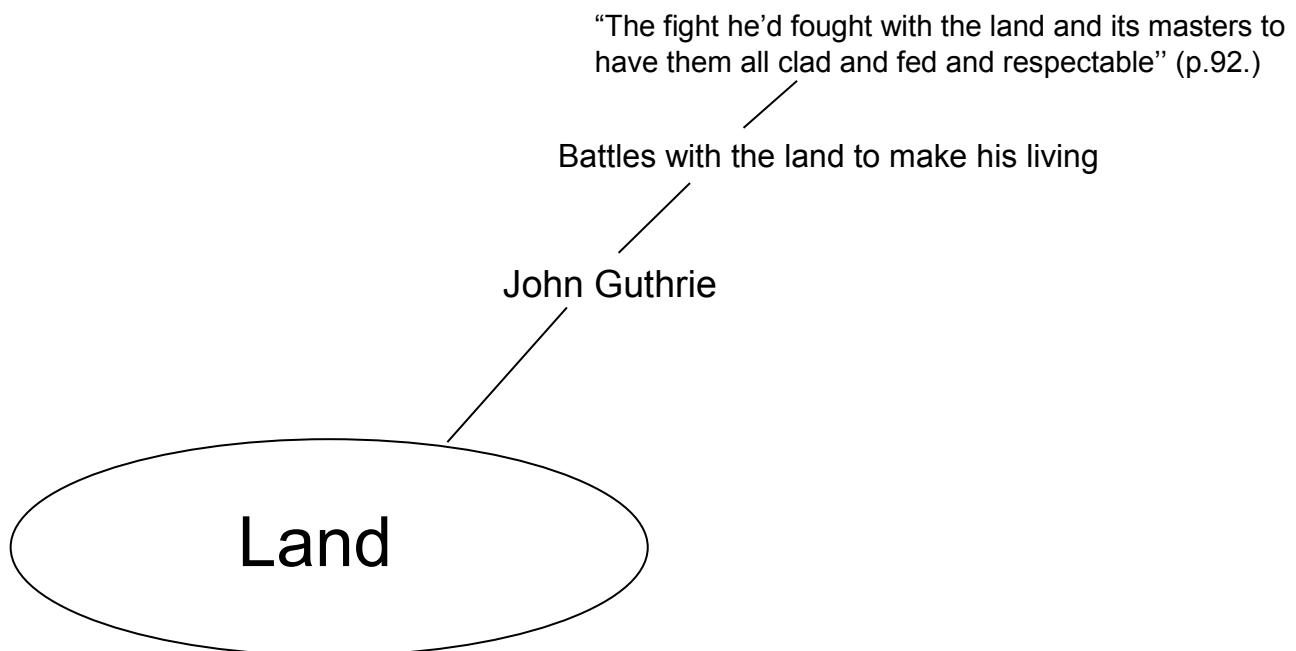
In the novel, land is often described as a living thing, and the farming community are perpetually tied to it. However, by the end of the novel, the land has been desecrated

by War, the men closely attached to it have been killed and modern farming methods have eradicated an old way of living and community life.

The land can provide comfort but can also cause trouble and heart ache. Chris can find solace in the nature around her, but her father becomes embittered by work on the land.

Ask pupils to complete a spider diagram showing how land impacts upon the characters in the text. Who is it connected to? Who does it hurt or comfort? Do characters' relationships with the land change throughout the text?

You can ask pupils to write quotes next to each point they have made. There are some quotes to help you in [Appendix 1](#).



# Exploring Chris's internal conflicts

## Learning objectives:

- To understand what is meant by duality
- To investigate Chris' duality

## Introducing duality

Chris is a well-rounded character because of her duality: she is split between the Scottish and English Chris. Gibbon embraces this duality and so avoids creating a one-dimensional character: Chris reflects the complexity inherent in all of us.

One way to introduce a lesson on duality would be to show pupils some of the images of Rio de Janeiro in [Appendix 2](#).

Ask them what impression they get of Rio from these images. After this, show them the third image [in Appendix 2](#):

Ask pupils what impression they get of Rio from these pictures. Ask them to compose one sentence which describes Rio, and limit them to 10 words. Their sentences should encompass both sides of Rio.

## Exploring Chris's duality

Chris is split between two selves in deciding between the land and education: this also manifests itself in her conflicted feelings about Ewan and the villagers in general.

Without introducing pupils to the idea that Chris experiences duality, ask them to repeat the exercise above, but this time the sentence should encompass both sides of Chris. You can use some of the quotes below to help them:

- ‘...two Chrisses there were that fought for her heart and tormented her. You hated the land and the coarse speak of the folk and learning was brave and fine one day...’
- ‘Weeping then, stricken and frightened because of that knowledge that had come on her, she could never leave it, this life of toiling...’
- ‘So, hurt and dazed, she turned to the land ...’
- ‘...two Chrisses went there each morning, and one was right douce and studious and the other sat back and laughed at the antics of the teachers and minded Blawearie brae and the champ of horses ...’

- ‘Right fond of the gentry was Kinloch, if you wore a fine frock and your hair was well brushed and your father was well to the fore he’d sit beside you and stroke your arm and speak in a slow sing-song that made everybody laugh behind his back.’

You can repeat this exercise to explore Chris’ different experiences of Ewan, and also the internal conflicts of John Guthrie.

### **Discussion**

Adolescence is often a time where we feel the need to spread our wings and perhaps travel and live somewhere else, but equally many of us miss the familiarity of home. Ask pupils to discuss the following questions:

- Towns and cities have their good points and bad points. What are the good and bad points of your home town? If you went away for a while, would you want to return? What would make you want to come back?
- Do you think that the place you live defines you to a large extent?
- Do you like Scotland? Do you feel a close connection to it?

### **Further questions**

- Why do you think Chris ultimately chooses the land? Is she influenced by others, or is the decision motivated by something within her, or is it a combination of both?
- What is your opinion of Chris’s decision? Would you have preferred to see her choosing education?
- Duality is a recurring theme in the novel. What effect does this have on your enjoyment of the novel and your experience of the characters?

### **Chris’s character**

Ask your pupils to create a mock-up Facebook, Tiktok or Instagram profile for Chris Guthrie. In their notebook they should outline her interests, her environment, location and her friends. What kind of status updates would she compose? They can use quotes from the text to create status entries or tweets. These should reflect key moments in Chris’ life and her thoughts on her surroundings.

### **Exploring duality through the writing folio**

Duality can be a great basis for creating characters. Just as Chris is a girl who works the land who is also strongly attracted to books and learning, a character in a pupil’s short story could be similarly conflicted. Ask pupils to come up with some examples of characters with two contradictory sides.

# Background Study

## Learning objective:

- To explore the ways in which *Sunset Song* is a realistic novel

*Sunset Song* was published in 1932. Its publication coincided with on-going cultural reinvigoration in Scotland that is now regarded as the Scottish Renaissance of the early 20th Century. *Sunset Song* bucked the trend of heavily romanticised and sentimental Scottish books like *The Bonnie Brier Bush* by Ian McLaren.

The activity below will help you to introduce the idea of realistically portraying a subject in fiction.

Some modern films have been guilty of romanticising their subjects. Introduce pupils to this concept by referring to the film *Braveheart*, mentioning the following distortions:

- In *Braveheart*, William Wallace is depicted as the man solely responsible for orchestrating victory at the Battle of Stirling Bridge, when in fact Andrew Moray also commanded the Scottish army at this battle;
- Wallace was not the son of a poor farmer as depicted in the film; rather, he is widely thought to have been the son of a laird;
- In the film, Wallace has a passionate affair with the French Princess Isabelle, the wife of his enemy Prince Edward; in reality, Isabelle was a very small child at the time, so this affair is entirely fictional.

Considering these facts, ask pupils to write answers to or discuss the following questions:

- Why do you think the writers of *Braveheart* included these particular inaccuracies in the film? What was the intended effect on their audience? Would this effect still have been achieved by a completely accurate film?
- Other popular movies with notable inaccuracies include *Rush*, *Pearl Harbour* and *Dallas Buyers Club*. Do you think audiences always want writers to be completely accurate and honest about their subjects? Give reasons for your answer.
- Do you think people romanticise aspects of their own pasts? What kinds of things might we have a romanticised view of?

After this, ask your pupils to think about the depictions of the following in *Sunset Song*. In what ways do these depictions show a less than idealised version of Scottish crofter life?

- Religion

- Family life and relationships
- Women and their role in crofting
- Sex and sexuality
- Childbirth

### **Extension**

Tell pupils that they are going to write a review of the book, but ask them to take the position of a critic who is scandalised by the portrayal of the above subjects in the book. Ask them to write a scathingly critical review of *Sunset Song*: they should refer to and quote from key scenes, and convey their outrage and disbelief about each scene.

## **The impact of Gibbon's life on *Sunset Song***

### **Learning objectives:**

- To understand how Lewis Grassic Gibbon's experiences and beliefs influenced the setting and plot of *Sunset Song*.

Ask pupils to research Lewis Grassic Gibbon's life.

One activity to help you explore the influence of Gibbon's life would be to create a wall chart/table that includes key moments of Gibbon's life. Pupils can pair these with corresponding themes and events in *Sunset Song*. Example below:

<b>Aspect of Gibbon's life</b>	<b><i>Sunset Song</i></b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Page Numbers/Quotes</b>
Commitment and love of working the land.	Chris escapes countryside, Land calls Ewan back from war. John Guthrie's toil of the land	Identity, History	"...folk said he could smell the weather and had fair the land in his bones." (p.29)

You can also ask your pupils to make Trump Cards. Have everyone in the class create a character identity card. From the biography, use the bold indicators as the attributes.

# Top trump cards activity

Put the character's name at the top of the front of the card.

Pick 4 themes/experiences in Gibbon's life, such as:

1. Working/love of the land
2. Smeddum
3. Socialism/communism
4. Affected by War

Against your chosen character, grade these 6 themes with points. In order to justify these allocated points, mark on the back of the card your reasons.

You can find a template for this activity in [Appendix 3](#).

All points must not surpass a total of 150.

[How to play top trumps](#).

When finished, display them on the wall and make a show of it!

Character	
Appreciation of the land	
Smeddum	
Socialism	
Affected by war	

Character	
Appreciation of the land	
Smeddum	
Socialism	
Affected by war	

# Appendix 1

## Quotes on Land

- “Out of the World and into Blawearie they said in Kinraddie and faith! it was coarse land” (prelude)
- “Weeping then, stricken and frightened because of that knowledge that had come on her, she could never leave it, this life of toiling” (p.96)
- “The land was forever, it moved and changed below you, but was forever” (p.95)
- “Scotland lived, she could never die, the land would outlast them all”(p.193)
- “So, hurt and dazed, she turned to the land” (p.206)
- “But it wasn't bad land ...there was the sweat of two thousand years in it” (p.29)
- “Arable land, the parks were as tough and stony as the heart of the old wife herself” (p.17)
- “Folk said he could smell the weather and had fair the land in his bones” (p.22)
- “A darkness on the land he loved better than his soul or god.” (p.55)
- “The fight he'd fought with the land and its masters to have them all clad and fed and respectable” (p.92.)
- “The sadness of the land” (p.141)
- “You hated the land and the coarse speak of the folk and learning was brave and fine one day; and the next you'd waken with the peewits crying across the hills, deep and deep, crying in the heart of you and the smell of the earth in your face, almost you'd cry for that, the beauty of it and the sweetness of the Scottish land and skies.”
- “Chris of the land”
- “The last of the farming folk that wrung their living from the land with their own bare hands”
- “Father said the salt of the earth were the folk that drove a straight drill and never looked back, but she was no more than a ploughed land still”
- “There are better things than your books or studies or loving or bedding, there's the countryside your own, you its”

- “And up above Upperhill they had cut down the larch, and the wood was ... and said that the Government would replant all the trees when the War was won. ... Then the factor said that they must all do their bit at a sacrifice, and Chae asked [...] every soul made money and didn't care a damn though.”

### Quotes on the theme of change

- "...the day of the crofter was fell near finished"
- "...the folk seemed different; into their bones the War had eaten, they were money-mad or mad with grief..."
- "...the dead below those stones, farmers and ploughmen and their wives, and little bairns and new-born babes, their bodies turned to skeletons now."
- "...daft things...that this marriage of hers was nothing, that it would pass on and forward into days that had long forgotten it."
- "...the dreams ----folded them up in their paper of tissue and laid them away by the dark, quiet corpse that was your childhood.'
- "The last of the Peasants, the last of the old Scots folk. A new generation comes up that will know them not, except as a memory in a song.'
- "It was old Scotland that perished then, and we may believe that never again will the old speech and the old songs, the old curses and the old benedictions, rise but with alien effort to our lips."

## Appendix 2



Image courtesy of Rodrigo Soldon on Flickr:  
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## **Appendix 3**

<b>Character:</b>	

<b>Reasons for allocating points</b>	