

Sunset Song Study Guide

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Plot Summary

Sunset Song intertwines the life story of a young woman named Chris Guthrie with the history of a fictional Scottish community called Kinraddie during the early years of the twentieth century up to and including World War One and its immediate aftermath.

The Prelude creates a mythology and history for Kinraddie dating back to the twelfth century, weaving the history of the town into many major events in Scottish, British, and European history, including the battles between Scotsman William Wallace and the English, the English Reformation, and the French Revolution. The latter part of the Prelude describes Kinraddie as it existed in the winter of 1911 and introduced all of the characters living there at the time.

In Chapter 1 Jean Guthrie – the mother of the protagonist, Chris Guthrie – discovered she was pregnant with twins, despite already having four children. Because their family was now so large, her husband John took the decision to take over the lease at a farm called Blawearie and move the whole family to Kinraddie. Jean was deeply unhappy about having more children, but with no access to contraception and her husband's refusal to respect her decisions about her body, she was left with no choice. Once in Kinraddie, Chris was sent to study at a nearby college where she felt herself torn between two identities: one which loved learning and the intellect, the other which loved agriculture and the land.

In Chapter 2, Jean murdered the baby twins and committed suicide after finding out that she was pregnant once again. Chris left college and devoted herself to working on the farm. Chris's older brother Will ran away with a local girl whom he married and took to South America. John was so angry that he suffered a health crisis which left him paralyzed.

In Chapter 3, John died and Chris inherited all of his money and property. Rather than sell it, she decided to continue to run Blawearie on her own. Chris started a relationship with a local laborer called Ewan Tavendale. They got married and Chris later discovered that she was pregnant.

In Chapter 4, Chris gave birth to her baby whom she named Ewan. Britain declared war with Germany and many of the local men went to France to fight: some by choice, others against their wishes. Ewan signed up for the army. He returned home from training on leave and treated Chris very badly. Chris refused to speak to him when he left. Later, Chris received a telegram telling her that Ewan had been killed in the war.

In the Epilude, a new Reverend at the church in Kinraddie commissioned a monument to commemorate the men of Kinraddie who were killed in the war. The Reverend began a romantic relationship with Chris and Chris attended the unveiling of the monument with her son.

Prelude: The Unfurrowed Field

Summary

Sunset Song tells the history of the fictional community of Kinraddie in Scotland, through the life of one of its residents, a young woman called Chris Guthrie who resided in the village during the early years of the twentieth century.

The Prelude begins the story of Kinraddie from as far back as the twelfth century when, legend had it, a mythical beast resided there and a heroic man named Cospatric de Gondeshil killed the beast and was rewarded by the King of Scotland who made Cospatric a Knight. Cospatric got the local peasants to build him a castle in Kinraddie, where he lived until he died. The Prelude detailed the various exploits of Cospatric's descendants, including their involvement with the battles between William Wallace and the English Army in the thirteenth Century. During those battles a young bride who lived at Kinraddie castle, who was unable to conceive a baby, had an affair out of wedlock in order to get pregnant.

During the English reformation, when the Church of England broke away from the Catholics of Rome in the sixteenth Century the Kinraddie clan didn't get involved until they were threatened with violence. During the nineteenth century the French Revolution influenced people in Scotland and Kenneth Kinraddie began selling off the estate because of his belief that all people should be treated equally. After he died his wife was left with nothing but land and farms, which were rented out on short-term leases to farmers who worked the land. When she died, her son took over the estate which he converted into larger farms. He planted forests to shield the farms from the bitter weather. He only had one son, who was locked away in a mental asylum, bringing the Kinraddie family to an end.

After this extensive history of the Kinraddie estate, the Prelude describes the various people living on the estate during the winter of 1911. An Irishman named Erbert Ellison ran the biggest farm – which had belonged to the Castle in the olden days - on behalf of the trustees of the estate. Rumor had it that Ellison used to share a bed with the final Lord Kinraddie, before he was locked away in an asylum. During the winter of 1911 the church and its attached house were lying empty, awaiting the appointment of a new minister.

At Peesie's Knapp lived the Strachan family. The land was farmed by Chae Strachan, who was a socialist who had travelled the world extensively before settling in his home country of Scotland. Chae's wife was called Kirsty and the narrator implied that Chae had been entrapped into marrying her when her mother caught them having sex. Up the road from Chae was a farm known as Blawearie. Next to Blawearie was a loch on the banks of which Druids had erected the Standing Stones, where they used to worship. Blawearie had been vacant for almost a year but a new tenant, called John Guthrie, was on his way.



Analysis

The Prelude serves the function of establishing the fictional Kinraddie Estate in a way that ties it into numerous real historical events, which make the village seem like it is connected to the history of Scotland. By referencing historical Scottish heroes such as William Wallace the author focusses on the antagonism between Scotland and England in a historical context. Later in the novel, this antagonism is explored on an individual level through the character of Chris Guthrie who feels caught between her English and her Scottish identities while growing up.

The historical narrative about Kinraddie also serves to introduce many of the novel's key themes and motifs which are explored more fully in the main body of the text. For example, the noblewoman becoming pregnant by a man other than her husband hints at the sexual indiscretions which fuel the gossip mill of Kinraddie later in the novel; the fickle and changing responses to the various wars and conflicts which the people of Kinraddie are involved in throughout history foreshadow the changeable and hypocritical attitudes of many of the townspeople after the outbreak of World War One; and Kenneth Kinraddie's interest in socialism foreshadows the opinions that Chae Strachan goes on to espouse in the main text, as well as the eventual arrival of the socialist minister Colquhoun during the Epilude. Kenneth Kinraddie's son, who is eventually imprisoned in an asylum, plants the woods which are cut down during WW1, which Chae correctly predicts will ruin the land for farming.

The rest of the Prelude is devoted to introducing the cast of characters who form the backdrop of the novel. The author makes the decision not to introduce the protagonist – Chris Guthrie – in this section, preferring instead to set the scene in Kinraddie before her arrival there and merely hinting at her arrival by mentioning the empty Blawearie farm and the impending arrival of her father, John Guthrie.

The depiction of sex and lust as dangerous is established in the Prelude through the description of Chae Strachan being trapped into marriage with a disagreeable woman after giving into his desire to have sex with her. Male lust is treated as a damaging force throughout the novel, destroying the lives of many of the characters.

The vacant ministry discussed in the Prelude comes full circle during the course of the novel and the position is vacant again during the Epilude, before it is filled by a new minister who changes the tone of the town.

The Standing Stones are the one constant element in the novel. Unlike the seasons, the families living in the village, and the political philosophies of Kinraddie's inhabitants, the standing stones never change. They stand by the loch through the entirety of the history of the estate, through all the upheaval depicted in the Prelude, and continue there throughout the rest of the events of *Sunset Song*, still standing tall at the end of the novel despite all that has changed around them during that time.



Discussion Question 1

What effect does the Prelude have on the rest of the novel?

Discussion Question 2

What political allegiances does Kinraddie show over the years? How does this tendency appear in the main body of the text?

Discussion Question 3

How does the author introduce the minor characters? What effect does this have?

Vocabulary

gryphons, gloaming, heralds, pastures, rout, tormented, hornbeams, squatting, lair, boar, bleak, canny, noble, yammer, rebel, provision, vagabond, bickerings, crony, idle



Chapter 1 - Ploughing

Summary

In Chapter 1 of *The Song – Ploughing* – the reader is introduced to the protagonist, a young woman called Chris Guthrie, during a drought in Kinraddie. Chris remembered that there was always plenty of rain up near Aberdeen, where she and her family had lived before her father John took over the lease at Blawearie in Kinraddie.

When Chris's mother Jean and her father John first met, John's face used to turn black with rage because Jean's beauty tempted him to have sex with her, which she would not permit until after they were married. After they were married, they had Chris and her brother Will then later two more sons called Dod and Alec. Jean complained that she didn't want to have any more children but John couldn't resist his lust for her and, due to the lack of access to any reliable form of contraception, Jean fell pregnant again and gave birth to twins.

Will hated their father because he used to beat him brutally. Chris was very intelligent and was praised by her teachers at school. Chris felt like there were two versions of her: the Scottish Chris, born to a farming family that loved the land, and English Chris who loved reading and education.

The birth of the twins was very difficult for Jean and she suffered greatly. John felt very guilty for the suffering she was going through and asked God to forgive him for his lust. Will criticized John and said that Jean was too old to be having another baby, but Chris didn't understand how pregnancies happen and asked Will what John had to do with it. Will was too embarrassed to explain.

After the twins were born there was no longer enough room for them at home, so John took up the lease at Blawearie and the family moved to Kinraddie. On the journey Chris imagined she saw a man running towards them shouting, "The ships of Pytheas!" They were all very cold when they arrived, and Will suggested to Chris that they should share a bed to warm up. When day broke, Will moved back to his own bed because he was worried about what their father would think if they found them in bed together, but Chris didn't understand what Will meant. Chris used to go to the Standing Stones near the loch to read her books, but her father didn't like the stones.

Chris was sent to college where she made a friend named Margret Strachan, the daughter of Chae Strachan. At college, Chris felt torn between her English self and her Scottish self. Margret told Chris what it would be like when a man tried to kiss her, and then Margret took Chris in her arms and kissed her herself. Margret moved to Aberdeen to live with an auntie there and Chris went to the station with Chae to wave her goodbye.



Andy, a man who had been released from a mental asylum, sexually harassed a number of women in the village including Chris. Andy was carted back to the asylum. The town appointed a new minister, Reverend Gibbon, after he gave a sermon comparing the beauty of the Church of Scotland to the beauty of a woman's body.

One very warm day, Chris stripped from most of her clothes to do her housework and John was very angry when he saw her dressed like that and told her she should be ashamed of herself. Jean told Chris that she didn't have any advice for her about how to deal with men and that she would have to work things out for herself. Jean told Chris to remember her words if Jean couldn't stand it any longer, but Chris didn't know what she meant.

At the end of "Ploughing" the drought in Kinraddie came to an end.

Analysis

Chapter 1 immediately establishes the protagonist as one of the family mentioned in the Prelude who is moving to Kinraddie. The description of life before the Guthries move to Kinraddie focuses on the damaging effect that John Guthrie's rage and lust has on the lives of the other members of the Guthrie family. The one who suffers most is Jean because she is forced to have more and more children against her will because of her husband's insistence on continuing to have sex with her. Jean's despair in these early chapters foreshadows her suicide later in the novel.

The author links John's lust with his rage, showing how both emotions damage his family. Will hates his father because of his violent temper and because he brutally beats Will when he is a child. The beatings are used as a reference point throughout the novel to demonstrate to the reader what the power dynamics are between John and Will. In this chapter Will is completely at John's mercy, being only a child, but later in the novel as Will grew into a man he becomes more resistant to John's behavior and eventually is a more physically threatening force than his father.

Chris's hallucination, or ghostly vision, when she first arrives in Kinraddie is a reference to an ancient Greek explorer said to have visited Scotland. This ties in with the author's desire to depict his characters as being part of the whole of Scottish history, rather than just the story of one isolated community. Chris has another similar vision at the end of the novel when she imagines seeing Ewan's ghost returning from the war.

Will and Chris sharing a bed together foreshadows the incestual propositions that John makes to Chris after he is paralyzed, as well as underlining Chris's naivety about sexual matters. Unlike Will, Chris is still unaware of where babies come from and what biological urges cause men and women to have sex with each other. Chris undergoes a gradual sexual awakening throughout the rest of the novel.

The conflict between Chris's sense of herself as Scottish and her sense of herself as English mirrors the conflict between the importance of history and the need to move into the future which also features in the novel. In this analogy Scotland is a metaphor for



the past and England is the metaphor for the future. Although Scotland contains a noble history, more pragmatic characters in the novel accept that the future will involve everyone adopting English norms and culture if they are going to survive.

Chris's friendship with Margret Strachan is notable because it is the only close bond that Chris has with a woman during the novel, except for her relationship with her mother. Throughout the rest of the novel Chris identifies more strongly with men in Kinraddie – notably Chae and Long Rob of the Mill – never again forming any close friendships with women after Margret leaves. The kiss from Margret begins the sexual awakening of Chris that continues throughout the rest of the novel.

The characterization of Reverend Gibbon continues the use of male lust as a sign of deviancy and dishonesty in the novel. Gibbon is hired for the post of minister in Kinraddie because several of the parishioners found his sermon titillating. Because sex is depicted negatively in the novel, the association of Reverend Gibbon with sexual pleasure foreshadows his dishonest and dangerous behavior later in the novel.

The day Chris strips down to her underwear while doing her household chores is a major turning point in the novel, as it marks the occasion that Chris realizes she had a woman's body, rather than a girl's. This moment marks the point where Chris becomes an object of male lust. For a novel which focusses on the sexual awakening of a young woman by describing her changing body, it is a sign of the times in which the novel was written that no mention is made of Chris's menstrual cycle and how the start of her period must have first alerted her to her changing body long before the changing behavior of the male gaze did so.

Discussion Question 1

What effect does the birth of the twins have on the novel?

Discussion Question 2

What is John Guthrie's relationship like with his children?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Chris's vision when she first arrives in Kinraddie?

Vocabulary

broom, cobalt, veer, dandering, parched, quivered, loch, smithy, blistering, skirled, yowled, brute, capitalism, glowering, baying, skillings, tramped, blithe, bonny, mane



Chapter 2 - Drilling

Summary

In Chapter 2 – “Drilling” – Jean poisoned herself and the baby twins when she found out that she was pregnant again. Chris left college as a result and felt that one version of herself – the version that loved books and learning – died along with her mother.

John’s sister, Janet, and her husband, Tam, came to visit and offered to take Alex and Dod home with them, on the condition that they be allowed to adopt them. John agreed and the boys moved to Aberdeen. Will told Chris that he wanted to move to Canada.

One day a “tink” – a derogatory term used to refer to Gypsies and other itinerant people – came to the farm and asked John for work. John told the man he had to sleep in the barn. Chris took the laborer some food to the barn and the laborer told her he could tell she hadn’t lost her virginity yet and he’d be happy to have sex with her if she wanted him to. Chris left the barn without responding but later that night when she was alone in her room she thought about how easy it would be to go to the man in the barn. Chris admired her changing body in her bedroom mirror and imagined what it would be like to have a husband.

Will began riding his bicycle to the nearby village of Drumlithie every evening. Lots of gossip circulated around Kinraddie during Harvest time, including the suggestion that a laborer from the Upperhill farm named Ewan Tavendale had been caught having sex with an unmarried woman called Sarah Sinclair and a rumor that Reverend Gibbon had been caught having sex with a woman who wasn’t his wife. Rumors were spread that Will had gotten a girl in Drumlithie, named Mollie Douglas, pregnant. Mollie bumped into Chris while she was running errands and asked her to ask Will to come to visit her. Mollie told Chris that the rumors about her and Will were not true.

Chris told Will she’d spoken to Mollie. Will said he couldn’t marry Mollie because he didn’t have his own income. Chris told Will about the rumors that he had gotten Mollie pregnant, and he went to Drumlithie and got into a fight with some of the men who had been spreading the rumors. John confronted Will about the rumors and tried to hit him, but Will was stronger and held him back. Will told Chris that the rumors were untrue.

The Guthries went to help Chae Strachan harvest his corn and Chris served food to the men. She met Ewan Tavendale and they both blushed when they met. Chae’s barn caught fire and the whole village turned up to help him put the fire out. Afterwards, as Chris was walking home, a stranger grabbed her and kissed her but she didn’t know who it was. She kicked him and the man ran away.

One night while Chris was baking, Ewan Tavendale came to Blawearie looking for Will but only Chris was home. Chris was hot from the baking and only wearing a vest and



petticoat. Chris realized that Ewan was the man who had kissed her the night Chae's barn burned down.

In July, Will announced he was going to Aberdeen for the day but never came back. He sent a letter to Blawearie saying he had married Mollie and they were emigrating to Argentina. John was enraged and had a health crisis which left him paralyzed. John used a whistle to summon Chris when he wanted her and she became exhausted by running the farm and taking care of him.

Analysis

Jean's death by suicide, and the infanticide she commits against the baby twins, is one of the bleakest moments in the novel. Jean's plight demonstrates how desperate women could become when they were financially dependent on their husbands and unable to exercise any control over their own fertility. The story of Jean's life and, in particular, the story of Jean's marriage serves as a cautionary tale to Chris about the importance of not ending up in a situation where her welfare and happiness are entirely dependent on a man. Although to a certain extent Chris remains dependent on the help and support of men throughout the novel – most notably Ewan, Chae, Rob, and Colquhoun – she nevertheless manages to carve out a level of independence and freedom in her life that is denied to her mother.

Jean's death also signifies the first major shift in Chris's character by ending the perceived divide between her English self and her Scottish self. Because Jean's death necessitates Chris leaving college, it brings to an end any dreams she had of pursuing her intellectual and creative talents, instead obliging her to lead a rural life and devote her time and energy to agriculture.

Jean's pregnancy and her subsequent suicide create a sense of foreboding which resurfaces later in the novel when Chris discovers she is pregnant and contemplates suicide as well.

Chris's growing independence after her mother's death is symbolized by her interaction with the itinerant laborer who stays in the barn at Blawearie. Although Chris does not follow through on her urge to visit the man in the barn after nightfall, it marks a turning point in her attitudes to her life and her body that she would consider doing something that would go against her father's wishes and against the norms of the society in which she grew up. Chris's attraction to the laborer sets the scene for her attraction to another "tink", Ewan Tavendale, later in the novel.

The rumors about Ewan and Will set up a contrast between the two men which foreshadows Ewan's unpleasant behavior later in the novel. Whereas Will resists the urge to have sex with Mollie because he knows it would be damaging for her personally, Ewan has an affair with Sarah Sinclair which threatens her reputation.

The incident at Chae's barn is symbolic of the forces of community and the political philosophy of socialism which permeates the novel. Chae is the character most strongly



associated with socialism in the novel and he is also the character who benefits most from its core concepts: that people should help each other as a collective unit rather than leave each person to deal with all of their problems as an individual. Chae's community spirit and generosity towards others in his community is rewarded when his family suffers a potential tragedy when his barn catches fire. Rather than being left to deal with this catastrophe alone, Chae is helped by the entire community who turn up voluntarily to help him save his family, livestock, and livelihood.

When Ewan comes to Blawearie looking for Will and finds Chris there not wearing very much clothing, it echoes the moment from Chapter 1 when John found Chris conducting her household chores in a similar state of undress. Chris's realization that Ewan is the man who kissed her the night Chae's barn burned down paints Ewan as a potentially dangerous character, and sets the scene for his later personality change when he becomes unexpectedly violent and crude towards Chris and their son. Will's departure to Aberdeen and his communication of his plans via letter rather than in person is echoed later in the novel when Ewan also leaves Chris at Blawearie without any explanation, only telling her what has happened by letter after the fact.

Discussion Question 1

Who or what do you think is to blame for the death of the twins?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Will want to leave Scotland?

Discussion Question 3

What differences are there between the options in life available to Chris and Will?

Vocabulary

cambered, brae, coarse, queer, wrung, aureal, gnomans, bairn, futret, clamoured, unsound, girmed, prowling, famished, stragglings, loitered, scythed, reapers, snarling, whirr



Chapter 3 - Seed-time

Summary

At the beginning of Chapter 3 – Seed-time – Chris ran to the standing stones and swore to herself that she would never go back to Blawearie and would instead commit suicide. Chris reflected that she had not been to the standing stones for a long time, not since her father had died.

When John first died, Chris had felt happy about it and didn't care that others thought she was heartless to feel that way. After he was paralyzed, John became very morose and demanding, constantly asking Chris to do things for him which she found exhausting. Her father made sexual advances towards her during this time, which she refused. She started the habit of locking her bedroom door at night because she was so frightened of him. As a result of this, John's death came as a relief.

The morning she found her father dead, Chris responded to the discovery by quietly enjoying her breakfast before alerting Chae that she needed help. On the day of John's funeral, Chris's feelings got the better of her and she wept openly at her father's grave. She forgave him for the things he'd done and reflected that he had always done everything he could to protect their family.

Chris's Auntie Janet and Uncle Tam stayed at Blawearie when they came for the funeral. A lawyer called Mr. Semple came to the house the day after the funeral and revealed that John had left all of his money and property to Chris, giving nothing to his three sons or to his sister. Janet suggested to Chris that she should sell Blawearie and move in with them, but Chris said she would need time to think about it. The following morning, Chris went to see Mr. Semple. She saw two old women who ran a tearoom and decided she didn't want to end up an old maid like them. She told Mr. Semple she wanted to keep farming Blawearie herself and asked him to arrange for an older woman to come and live with her and help with the housekeeping.

Chris bumped into Ewan Tavendale and the two of them spent the day together, visiting a castle on a nearby island called Dunnottar. Chris asked Ewan about the rumors she'd heard concerning him and Sarah Sinclair, and he became very angry and told her it was all true. Chris became angry with him and ran away, but by the time Ewan caught up with her she wasn't angry anymore. They caught the train home.

That night Chris thought about Sarah and decided she wasn't angry with her for her liaison with Ewan. Her thoughts were interrupted by a thunder storm. Chris asked Uncle Tam for his help bringing the horses in but he refused because he was scared of lightning. Out in the fields, Chris found Chae and Ewan who had come out in the storm to help her with her horses. Chris, Ewan, and Chae waited for the rain to stop at Chae's house. Ewan walked Chris and her horses back to Blawearie and they kissed. Ewan asked Chris when she would marry him.



Janet and Tam left the following morning. Later that day, an old woman named Mistress Melon arrived to live with Chris. Ewan came to see Chris later that night. Chris and Ewan decided to get married in December. The whole town attended Chris and Ewan's wedding at Blawearie on New Year's Eve. The community celebrated together and sang traditional Scottish songs.

Chris and Ewan were blissfully happy together during the first few months of their marriage. But Chris became less happy when she realized she was pregnant. Chris didn't tell Ewan she was pregnant until one day when she became very angry with him and insulted him. They argued, Chris hit Ewan and Ewan hit her in return, knocking her to the ground. Chris ran away from him and went to the standing stones.

Later that day, Chris heard Ewan looking for her. She called out to him and he came to bring her home.

Analysis

Seed-time is bookended by the two different depictions of the same moment in Chris's life: the day that she fights with Ewan and runs away to the standing stones, where she contemplates committing suicide. However, in the depiction of this event that begins the chapter, the reader is entirely unaware what has caused Chris to feel so much despair that she would rather die than go back to Blawearie. The rest of the chapter builds on the tension planted in this opening moment, by highlighting other occasions in Chris's life – such as her father's sexual advances, his death, or events connected to her courtship with Ewan – that might lead her to do such a thing.

The ominous opening of this chapter is immediately followed by the depiction of a very dark time in Chris's life, when it was only her and her father John living at Blawearie. During this time Chris, like her mother Jean before her, is trapped by her dependence on a man. Chris's food and financial security are dependent on the Blawearie farm which legally belongs to her father. With nowhere else to go and no other means of supporting herself, Chris is forced to stay there and take care of her father despite his abusive and disturbing behavior towards her.

John's will affords Chris agency and personal freedom that was exceedingly rare for an unmarried woman of her era. For the first time in her life, Chris is in charge of making her own decisions and dictating how her own life would turn out. Despite this, Chris decides to continue living in much the same way she had done before being granted this unprecedented freedom, continuing to farm the land at Blawearie and (later) continuing to cook and clean for the men of her family.

John's death brings about a brief fantasy for Chris that she could return to the "English Chris" who aspired to become well-educated and open her own school. Events that occurred after John's death conspire to change her mind about this, most notably her deep personal attachment to the land of Blawearie itself, but also her dismay at the fate of the two women who ran a tearoom who – Chris speculated – had never known what



it was like to be with a man. Chris's horror at the fate of the two women propels her towards Ewan when they meet after Chris's meeting with Mr. Semple.

The potential difficulties of Chris and Ewan's relationship are made immediately clear during their first extended length of time together visiting a nearby island. Both characters have quick tempers and are easily angered which leads to multiple – sometimes violent – arguments throughout the novel. Their first argument – about Ewan's affair with Sarah Sinclair – sets up a pattern in their relationship whereby one of them storms away from the other after an argument, only for Chris to eventually relent and call for Ewan to come back to her. This pattern repeats for all but one of their arguments, which occurs the last time they ever see each other.

The night of the thunder storm symbolizes the difference between townsfolk and country folk when Chris's uncle Tam refuses to help her take care of the horses due to his fear of natural elements. Unlike Tam, Chae and Ewan feel a social responsibility to help Chris with her horses, knowing that she was running a farm on her own. These community values, and traditional Scottish culture, are further reinforced in the extended sequence at Chris and Ewan's wedding where the entire community come together to celebrate. The wedding is the high point of the novel in the depiction of the strong sense of community in Kinraddie, which is destroyed by the events of World War One in the following chapter.

When Chris realizes she is pregnant, she doesn't tell Ewan for quite some time. This creates a sense of foreboding because the reader is aware of what a damaging and tragic effect pregnancy and childrearing had on the welfare and mental health of Chris's mother Jean. Chris's pregnancy harks back to the opening moments of this chapter when Chris contemplates suicide, leading the reader to wonder whether she will kill herself rather than give birth to her baby, just as her mother had decided to do. Ewan's violence towards Chris before he learns she is pregnant foreshadows the change in his character which occurs after his return from Aberdeen.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Chris's reaction to her father's death shock some people?

Discussion Question 2

What role does Chae Strachan play in Chris's life?

Discussion Question 3

What is Chris's reaction to falling pregnant?



Vocabulary

flush, uncoil, livid, branded, loch, tremulous, amorphousness, deemed, glooming, festering, aught, sniffling, agony, brute, hysteria, graze, raged, glowered, turnpike, clustered



Chapter 4 - Harvest and Epilude

Summary

The start of Chapter 4 – Harvest – carries straight on from the end of Chapter 3 when Ewan found Chris at the standing stones. Ewan carried Chris home and put her into bed then ran into the village to fetch a doctor. The doctor came and told Ewan that Chris was pregnant.

One night in August, before the baby was born, Chae Strachan visited them to tell them that Britain was at war with Germany. In September, Chris went into labor and gave birth to a baby boy whom they named Ewan. Chae came to visit them to see the baby and told them that the Germans were committing atrocities in the war and soon every man might have to fight to defend his family, but Ewan wasn't interested.

Chae volunteered to join the army. Reverend Gibbon preached a sermon defending the Germans and many of the congregation walked out in protest. To rectify the situation, the following week Gibbon preached a patriotic sermon which criticized the Germans. Long Rob of the Mill was attacked because people accused him of being pro-German.

Chae came to visit while he was on leave from training and Ewan asked whether he thought that Ewan should sign up too, but Chae told him not to. The woods around Kinraddie were cut down to supply materials for the war effort and Chae said that it would ruin the land for farming.

Parliament passed the Conscription Act which meant that men could be called into the army against their will. Rob was conscripted and refused to comply so he was sent to jail. Ewan decided to join the army without telling Chris about it. He told Chris he was going to Aberdeen and never came back, instead sending a letter explaining what he'd done. He said he was sick of people calling him a coward.

One day a man in a military uniform arrived at Blawearie. Although Chris didn't recognize him at first, she quickly realized it was her brother Will who had returned from Argentina and signed up to fight for the French in the war. Will spent the rest of his leave in Kinraddie and then left for the war. Rob was released from prison after he went on hunger strike. He came home but no one in Kinraddie wanted to do business with him anymore because they thought he was a coward. Chris cleaned his house and cooked his meals.

Ewan came home for leave before his deployment in France. He was cruel to Chris, taunting her by saying he'd been sleeping with prostitutes in Aberdeen. Ewan spent his leave drinking in nearby villages rather than being with his wife and son. On the day he left, Chris refused to speak to him. She thought about calling after him as he left, but she didn't. Later that night she regretted being so cold, but by then it was too late.



Rob helped Chris with the farm and they became close friends. One day Rob told Chris that he had decided to join the army after all. Chris kissed Rob and they had sex in the haystacks.

Chris received a telegram telling her that Ewan had been killed in France. Chae came home on leave and told Chris that Ewan had been shot for deserting the army. Ewan told Chae that he decided to leave because he realized he should have been at home with Chris and their son. Chris took Ewan junior up to the standing stones and imagined that she saw Ewan's ghost returning from the war.

In the Epilude, the war ended and Kinraddie got a new socialist minister called Reverend Colquhoun. A romance developed between the new minister and Chris and they planned to marry. The minister got funds to erect a monument in remembrance of the men from Kinraddie who had been killed in the war, including Ewan, Chae, and Rob. Their names were chiseled into the standing stones and unveiled at a ceremony attended by the whole town.

Analysis

Chris's immediate forgiveness of Ewan's violent behavior towards her before he knew she was pregnant is a continuation of a dynamic between the pair which is established early in their courtship when both would become very angry with each other but quickly reconcile after Chris calls Ewan back to her. Rather than escape the role of wife and mother via suicide, as her mother did, Chris calls to Ewan and they reconcile once again. The ferocity of this particular argument foreshadows the change in character that occurs in Ewan when he returns home from Aberdeen on leave later in the chapter.

Despite the ominous depiction of pregnancy and childbirth earlier in the novel – in which Jean suffers greatly while giving birth to the twins, whom she later murders – Chris's own labor goes smoothly and she doesn't suffer much. Rather than immediately conceiving another child after the birth of Ewan junior, Chris and Ewan avoid having sex with each other in order to focus on making enough money to be able to raise their growing family. This allows Chris to avoid the fate of her mother but also drives Ewan to seek out the company of prostitutes when on military training in Aberdeen, which he angrily justifies to Chris by saying he was scared to touch her in case she got pregnant again. This dynamic further continues the novel's depiction of sexual intercourse as a damaging and destructive force.

The plight of Rob during World War One is symbolic of the destruction of community values which follows the patriotic and misleading rhetoric foisted onto the people of Kinraddie during the war. Despite being a long way away from any fighting, the residents become convinced that anti-war individuals are somehow dangerous, and become violent towards Rob out of the belief that his pacifism means that he sympathizes with the enemy.



The old values of Kinraddie are not completely destroyed, however, as evidenced by Chris's behavior when Rob returns from prison after going on hunger strike. Rather than turning against her old friend over a political conflict that has nothing to do with their lives, Chris continues with the values of neighborliness and community that have always defined her relationships with the people of Kinraddie, by taking care of Rob in his hour of need.

Will's return to Kinraddie is symbolic of how isolated the community there was from the rest of the world, and shows all the things that Chris may have missed out on in life by never leaving her home town. Will has seen things all over the world which will never be witnessed by anyone who chose to remain in Kinraddie and continue farming the land there.

Chris's final parting with Ewan echoes her final parting with her father John. Both men were abusive towards Chris, causing her to grow cold and detached from them. However, once each man leaves her life permanently, Chris is filled with regret at her own behavior and wishes that she could take it back. Chris's attitude to the abusive relationships she endured is indicative of the era in which the book was written. In the intervening time, society has advanced to the point where it appears bizarre and disturbing to see a victim of abuse like Chris feel guilty for her behavior towards her abusers.

Chris's decision to have sex with Rob marks a turning point in her developing independence and sense of herself as a sexual being. Their liaison represents Chris making her own decision about what to do with her body, freed from the expectations of society or her family. This demonstrates how different Chris's life is from her mother's, whose mental and physical wellbeing is destroyed by her inability to make her own decisions about what to do with her body.

The Epilude begins a new chapter in Kinraddie. Although much has changed in the village during the course of the novel, the standing stones symbolize the fact that the land itself will endure regardless of the historical upheaval that occurs around it. The beginning of World War One starts the slow destruction of Kinraddie as it has existed during the course of the novel. However, the reader is aware from the Prelude that Kinraddie as a community has already survived a huge amount of historical turmoil during its history. Although certain individuals from Kinraddie don't manage to survive the war, the land itself and the sense of place do endure.

Discussion Question 1

What effect does World War One have on Kinraddie?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Rob is right to refuse to fight in the war?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Ewan desert the army?

Vocabulary

compassion, bide, awakened, peered, drowsy, intimate, gasped, torrent, trim, hoeing, intent, malachite, sprig, crofter, toothsome, fancies, straining, gait, wakefulness, reaped



Characters

Chris Guthrie

Chris Guthrie is the central character/protagonist. The story of her life, as told in the novel, is intricately connected to the story of Kinraddie itself and the radical changes that the village undergoes in the early twentieth century, which coincides with radical changes in Chris's own life. Chris's life story is also tied to the changing seasons and the different agricultural processes that occur at different times of the year.

Chris first arrives in Kinraddie as a teenager and is brought there when her father decides to take over the lease at Blawearie. This is symbolic of Chris's dependence on her father and his plans and wishes at this moment in her life. As the novel progresses, however, Chris becomes more independent and more in control of what happens in her life. The titles of each chapter correspond to a particular phase in the agricultural work of each season, but also correspond to particular moments in Chris's life: for example Chris became pregnant during the chapter called "Seed-time" reflecting the growing life inside her body, and gave birth during the chapter called "Harvest" in which the seeds of the earlier season come to fruition.

Chris's life is largely defined by her relationship with men, most notably her brother Will, her father John, her husband Ewan, and her neighbors Chae and Rob. Chris has meaningful relationships with only two women in the novel – her mother Jean and her friend Margret Strachan – but both of these female characters leave the story early in the narrative, meaning Chris's main interactions and opportunities for growth are all connected to or caused by men.

Chris's sense of herself as an adult woman grew in the novel alongside the extent to which the male characters considered her body as a sexually attractive object. Although sexual intercourse initially presents itself as a destructive force in Chris's life – through her mother's suicide and her father's incestuous advances – Chris later takes control of her own sexuality and makes her own decisions about her body regardless of society's expectations of her, which is symbolized through her affair with Long Rob of the Mill.

Chris suffers several splits in her sense of self during the novel. Initially she feels torn between her English self (characterized by her intellect and love of learning) and her Scottish self (characterized by her love of the land and her spiritual connection to the standing stones). Later in the novel, Chris feels torn between her identity as Chris Guthrie – a young, unmarried woman – and her identity as Chris Tavendale, a wife and mother. Each new phase of Chris's life involves shedding one of her conflicting identities before she can move on to the next phase of her life.



John Guthrie

John Guthrie is Chris Guthrie's father. John serves a catalytic role in the novel as it is his insistence on having sex with Jean against her wishes that leads to the conception of the twins, which in turn leads to the Guthrie family moving to Kinraddie to farm land with enough room for their ever expanding family.

John has a tense relationship with his son Will and with his daughter Chris. John is physically abusive towards Will, regularly and ferociously beating him when he is a young boy. As Will grows into an adult man, physically and mentally stronger than his father, John is no longer able to control him. After he is paralyzed by a mysterious illness, John makes sexual advances towards Chris which leaves her so frightened that she takes to locking her bedroom door at night despite his disability.

John is the closest thing the novel has to a villain/antagonist, although ultimately the author seems to imply that he should be forgiven for his profoundly abusive behavior towards his children during the moments depicted at his funeral when Chris repents her cold and unforgiving attitude towards him. Will, however, does not offer any forgiveness and sympathy for his deceased father when he returns to Kinraddie.

Jean Guthrie

Jean Guthrie is John Guthrie's wife and Chris Guthrie's mother. The events of the novel are set into motion when Jean becomes pregnant with twins: her fifth and sixth children. Jean has a very difficult labor with the twins and is so distraught when she soon discovers that she is pregnant again that she kills herself and the twin babies rather than go through with having another child.

Jean's suicide leaves Chris without any female role models or any female guidance about how to cope with the challenges that she faces later in her life. Despite this, Chris's experience of pregnancy and motherhood (if not marriage) are much more positive than Jean's.

Will Guthrie

Will Guthrie is Chris Guthrie's elder brother. The contrast between Chris and Will's lives reveals the different opportunities available to men and women during the era in which the novel is set. Both Will and Chris suffer greatly at the hands of their abusive father John, but it was only Will who has the option of escaping the situation and moving to a new country by finding his own means of employment, an option that is not open to Chris. Although Chris eventually inherits a certain amount of freedom when John leaves everything to her in his will, it does not compare to the freedom Will has to travel the world and experience life outside of Scotland.



Chae Strachan

Chae Strachan is a farmer and a resident of Kinraddie. Chae has strong interests in the political philosophy of socialism, which propels everything that happens to his character during the course of the novel. Like Will, Chae had the opportunity to travel abroad when he was a young man, bringing a level of understanding and perspective on the situation of the poor globally that was lacking in people who had never left Kinraddie. Chae's belief that people should be equal and that it is the responsibility of everyone in a community to help to take care of everyone else works in his favor when his barn catches fire and everyone in the village immediately volunteers to help save his family and livestock. However, Chae's idealism ultimately leads to his death when he signs up to fight for the British in WW1, due to his belief that the war would bring equality for working people.

Long Rob of the Mill

Long Rob of the Mill is the mill owner and a resident of Kinraddie. Rob is conscripted into the army during WW1 but refuses to fight. As a result of this he is imprisoned, where he goes on hunger strike to protest the way that he is being treated. When he is released from prison no one in Kinraddie wants to do business with him anymore, leaving him without work or a way to support himself. The only resident who stands by him is Chris, who cooks and cleans for him when he is too weak to take care of himself. Rob later helps Chris farm her land in Ewan's absence to return the favor, and a romance blossoms between the pair, which is symbolic of Chris's independence and freedom from the dictates of her family and society at large.

Ewan Tavendale

Ewan Tavendale is a laborer at a nearby farm in Kinraddie at the outset of the novel and later becomes Chris's husband. Ewan undergoes a severe change of character while at military training in Aberdeen which makes him behave in a physically and emotionally abusive way towards Chris when he returns home on leave, echoing the abusive relationship that Chris had with her father. Ewan realizes the error of his ways once he found himself fighting in France and deserts the army in a failed attempt to return to Blawearie, which results in his execution.

Alec and Dod

Alec and Dod are Chris's younger brothers. After Jean commits suicide, the boys are taunted at school by classmates who laughed at their mother's mental illness. As a result of this the boys refuse to go back and are instead adopted by John's sister Janet and her husband Tam. They move to Aberdeen and do not return to Kinraddie. Alec and Dod's departure is part of the gradually encroaching isolation that Chris experiences after the death of her mother.



Aunt Janet and Uncle Tam

Aunt Janet is John Guthrie's sister and Uncle Tam is her husband. They represent the divide between town and country in the novel. By rejecting the possibility of going to live with Janet and Tam after her father's death, Chris reaffirms her commitment to agriculture and the land at the expense of her dream of becoming a school teacher. The less community-minded values of urban dwellers are symbolized by Tam's refusal to help Chris bring in the horses during a thunder storm, which is contrasted with Chae and Ewan (who, unlike Tam, are not related to Chris) coming out into the night to help her save her horses.

Mollie Douglas

Mollie Douglas is Will Guthrie's love interest, who eventually becomes his wife. She is the subject of malicious gossip during their courtship in which local people suggested that Will had gotten her pregnant out of wedlock. Mollie's marriage is contrasted with Chris's marriage: whereas Mollie's choice of husband results in her leaving her hometown and seeing the world, Chris's choice of husband further ensconces her in the rural life of Kinraddie and repeats the abusive pattern of her relationship with her father.

Margret Strachan

Margret Strachan is Chae Strachan's daughter and a friend of Chris's early in the novel, before Chris has to stop attending college. Margret is a significant character because she is Chris's only female friend in the novel. Unlike Chris, Margret chooses to pursue the dream of becoming a teacher and living in an urban environment, whereas (partially through necessity and partially through choice) Chris remains in Kinraddie to live a rural agricultural life.



Symbols and Symbolism

Standing Stones

The standing stones are symbolic of the history of Scotland and the fact that the land itself will continue to endure regardless of the historical and sociological changes that occur around it. By the end of the novel, everything that has defined Kinraddie during the time that Chris has lived there has been destroyed, but the standing stones remain in the exact same way they were when Chris first arrives, and in the exact same place they'd been since they were erected by the Druids. The tribute to the men killed in WW1 etched onto the stones represents the fact that the stones contain the shared history of everything that has occurred on the land.

Woods

The woods are in many ways the opposite of the standing stones in their symbolic significance, as they represent impermanence and change in the novel. Unlike the standing stones, the woods are a relatively recent development in Kinraddie having been planted there by Kenneth Kinraddie at the end of the nineteenth century. Not long afterwards (in historical terms) the woods are cut down to provide raw materials for the British war effort. Chae Strachan correctly predicts that this will ruin the land for farming, thus bringing this agricultural era in Kinraddie to a close.

England

Although none of the action of the novel takes place in England, the country is nevertheless a symbolic presence in the novel representing the forces of progress and change, but also the destruction of community and the loss of historic traditions and values. Chris feels torn between her dual identities of Scottishness and Englishness, with the former connected to history and rural landscapes, and the latter representative of education, creativity, and the intellect. The war is fought under the banner of Great Britain: a kingdom made up of the four countries of England, Scotland, Wales and (at the time) Ireland. The war represents Scottish men being obliged to fight on behalf of the English, rather than prioritizing the needs of their own people.

College

College is symbolic of Chris's conflicting identities and conflicting choices in life. Had she pursued her education, Chris would have been embracing her English identity and abandoning her Scottish agricultural heritage. After inheriting everything in her father's will, Chris briefly considers selling everything and opening her own school, before deciding that her connection to the land and the rhythms of the agricultural life are too much a part of her for her to let go. Chris meets Margret Strachan at college. Margret



chooses the opposite path to Chris by pursuing her education, making her symbolic of the road not taken by Chris.

Military Uniforms

Military uniforms are symbolic of the slow erosion of the tight-knit community which exists in Kinraddie at the start of the novel, but which has been destroyed by the closing chapters. The war itself physically removes a number of men from the village sending them to foreign lands they would not otherwise have visited. Will's return to Kinraddie in his unfamiliar French military uniform symbolizes how different his life is from the people who remain in Kinraddie. Chae and Ewan's military uniforms symbolize their disconnection and departure from their home and, in Ewan's case, from their previous character traits and understanding of morality and kindness.

Barn on Fire

When Chae Strachan's barn catches fire it is symbolic of the community spirit in Kinraddie and the political philosophy of socialism that Chae himself adheres to. Because Chae is known as someone who takes care of others in Kinraddie, rather than only caring about himself or his direct relatives, when Chae faces adversity in the form of his barn catching fire, there are a large number of people eager and willing to do anything they can to help him. This community spirit is gradually replaced by suspicion and in-fighting during WW1 when the community starts to fight with each other rather than support each other.

Pregnancy

Pregnancy is symbolic of the changing cycles of nature, but also a sinister reminder of the potentially dangerous implications of sexual intercourse. Jean commits suicide when she finds out that she is pregnant for sixth time, showing how damaging unwanted pregnancies could be for the physical and mental wellbeing of women who are not given sufficient control over their own bodies. However Chris's experience of pregnancy is more positive and reinforces her connection to the land of Blawearie and the cycles of nature when her own body reflects the seasons and changing necessities of the land.

Aberdeen

Aberdeen is a symbolic gateway in between Kinraddie and the rest of the world which other characters must pass through before they begin a new life no longer defined by the rural agricultural confines of Kinraddie. The first characters to leave for Aberdeen are Alec and Dod who move there to become part of a different family and urban lifestyle when they are adopted by Janet and Tam. Next, Will and Mollie go through Aberdeen before leaving the country for South America. Finally, all the men who left Kinraddie to fight in the war in France pass through Aberdeen on their way as that is



where the military training takes place. Ewan in particular is never the same after he's been to Aberdeen.

Wedding

Chris and Ewan's wedding is symbolic of the community spirit and historical traditions of the people of Kinraddie, all of whom show up to support the happy couple in spite of any differences or bickering that would usually keep them apart. At the wedding, several characters sing traditional Scottish songs which reflect an era in the country's history that is brought to an end before the novel's close.

Thunder Storm

The different reactions of different characters to the thunder storm which occurs shortly after John Guthrie's funeral is symbolic of the different attitudes of people from the countryside and city dwellers when it comes to family, responsibility, and obligation. Uncle Tam's fear of lightning underscores his disconnection from the forces of nature and his refusal to help Chris with the horses shows a lack of responsibility and concern for others. In contrast, Chae and Ewan venture out into treacherous conditions to help Chris with the horses out of an understanding that everyone is responsible for taking care of each other.



Settings

Kinraddie

The fictional Kinraddie Estate is the heart and soul of the novel where virtually all of the action in the narrative takes place. As described in the Prelude, vast and complex changes occurred in Kinraddie over the course of its history, but the land itself (symbolized by the standing stones, erected by the Druids) always endures despite the upheaval that occurs for the various residents and communities that spring up there over the centuries. During Chris's lifetime Kinraddie goes from a close-knit community that is prone to gossip, to a dysfunctional and combative place where differing opinions about WW1 cause residents to mistreat each other.

Blawearie

Blawearie is the farm John Guthrie takes over the lease for which first brings Chris and the rest of the Guthrie family to Kinraddie. It is described in the Prelude as the bleakest and hardest to farm piece of land in all of Kinraddie. It is the location where all of the major events of Chris's life – the deaths of her mother and her father, her marriage, the birth of her son, the news of her husband's death – occur. As everything around Chris changes, Blawearie continues to follow the same seasonal cycles.

Drumlithie

Drumlithie is a nearby village where Will goes to visit a young woman called Mollie Douglas who he later marries. The stories surrounding their courtship show that Drumlithie is as much driven by gossip as Kinraddie. Drumlithie is a gateway location for Will in his slow departure from Kinraddie: first he starts visiting Drumlithie, before going to Aberdeen, and eventually leaving Scotland entirely to emigrate to Argentina.

Aberdeen

Little of the action in the novel is set in Aberdeen, but the city nevertheless holds strong symbolic significance in the novel as the antithesis of the rural approach to life that Kinraddie epitomizes. Residents who leave Kinraddie – whether by choice or necessity – do so by passing through Aberdeen as a gateway to their new lives. This is especially true of the men who leave Kinraddie to go to the war in France, because it is the location of the nearest military training base.

France

A small portion of the action occurs in France, when Chae recounts to Chris the story of talking to Ewan the night before his execution. The significance of the location rests on how far away it is from Kinraddie, both metaphorically and physically. Ewan could have been farming in Kinraddie rather than fighting in France and the realization that he was in the wrong location causes him to desert his post resulting in his eventual execution. France also represents the allure of foreign cultures and unknown worlds, as depicted when Will returns to Kinraddie wearing a uniform of the French army.



Themes and Motifs

History

The central theme of the novel is History, which is symbolized by the presence in the town of the standing stones. Including the events described in the Prelude, the novel covers several centuries' worth of events occurring on the land that became known as Kinraddie. During this vast expanse of history, the only constant feature of the landscape is the standing stones, which serve to remind the reader of the passing of time and how nature remains constant even as society rapidly changes around it.

The novel is set-up in historical terms during the Prelude when the author creates a rich and far-reaching history for the fictional estate of Kinraddie which ties the community into important, factual, historical events such as the English Reformation and the French Revolution. The early parts of *The Song* are almost ahistorical in their disconnection from events occurring in the outside world, but the force of history is strongly felt in the latter half of *The Song* when the protagonist and the whole community have their lives irrevocably altered by the historical events of World War One, despite many of them never leaving Kinraddie.

On one level, history is presented as a transient force in which particular historical events and people – such as William Wallace and the French Revolution – which seemed hugely significant at the time, would still fade into the past and cease to affect the lives of the people inhabiting the land of Kinraddie. Although each phase in the community's history would have been felt deeply by the residents at the time, the Prelude suggests that these events quickly fade into the past and seem to hold less and less importance as time goes by. On another level, however, history is seen as a vital force which continues to effect the land long after the influence of the events that have passed: the final moments of the novel depict Chris as the culmination of all of the historical events that have occurred during the course of the novel and imply that Chris will carry the values and lessons of the past with her into the future of Kinraddie as it is shaped by newcomers such as the Reverend Colquhoun.

Chris's personal connection to the history of Kinraddie is shown through her ghostly visions: one which features a Scotsman heralding the arrival of the ancient Greek explorer Pytheas and the other imagining the return of Ewan home from the war.

The focus on the future in the Epilogue continues to be underpinned by a strong sense of history when the names of the men from Kinraddie who were killed during World War One – including three of the novel's central characters: Ewan Tavendale, Chae Strachan, and Long Rob of the Mill – are engraved onto the standing stones, which represent the history of Kinraddie. Despite their deaths and the changes that occur in Kinraddie during this era, their memory and the era of Kinraddie that they represent will live on into the future because of this monument.



Gossip

The theme of Gossip in the novel shows the disadvantages of the tight-knit community which is valorized through the theme Community Values and Socialism. Whereas the understanding that other people's problems are everyone's concern is of great help to Chae Strachan when his barn catches fire, the insistence on knowing and commenting on everyone else's personal affairs leads to mean-spirited gossip and the social policing of individual behavior by the group as a whole.

The most common form of gossip in the novel is gossip relating to sexual indiscretions, especially sexual intercourse which occurs outside of the confines of marriage. The social purpose of this sort of gossip is to limit the acceptable behavior of people – especially women – in a way that obliges them to conform to social, familial, and religious expectations even when these expectations do not align with their own feelings, beliefs, and desires. Women in particular are threatened with a damaged reputation by rumors of extramarital sex which would make people think of them as unfit for marriage to anyone other than the man they were said to have had sex with. However, these social expectations also have a negative impact on male characters in the novel. The Prelude indicated that Chae Strachan's marriage was formed as a result of an extramarital affair being discovered and Chae being pressured to marry the woman concerned against his wishes rather than ruining her reputation.

Chris's growing independence as an adult woman can be charted alongside her gradual loss of interest in the opinions and gossip circulating about her in Kinraddie. Chris is initially worried by gossip concerning her family when it occurs, specifically when rumors begin circulating about Will getting Mollie Douglas pregnant. Chris is sufficiently concerned by the gossip to decide to tell Will what people were saying about him, which causes Will to end up in a violent confrontation in Drumlithie. Later, after John's death, Chris is less concerned by gossip and professes not to care that the whole of Kinraddie thinks that she is coldhearted for not openly grieving for her father. Chris also upsets her aunt Janet by refusing to worry about gossip that implied she had sex with Ewan before they were married. The culmination of Chris's gradual dismissal of societal expectations comes when she has an affair with Rob shortly before he leaves for the war in France. Despite being taught that it was wrong by her culture, religion, and family, Chris opts to behave in the way that she wants to, asserting her authority to do whatever she wants to do with her own body without having to heed the beliefs of others.

Non-sexual gossip also plays a part in the novel, through the circulation of rumors about certain characters – notably Long Rob of the Mill – being pro-German during World War One. This shows how dangerous a tendency towards gossip can become when it is applied to life and death situations as this gossip results in an attempt to physically assault Rob as a reprisal for his political beliefs.



Sex

Sex is depicted as a destructive and dangerous force, especially in the first half of *Sunset Song*. The dangers of sexual intercourse are explored through the characters of John and Jean Guthrie. Even before they were married, John's sexual desire is painted as a damaging force which caused him to direct rage towards Jean in the mistaken belief that his feelings were her responsibility or something that she could be blamed for. This abusive dynamic continues once the pair are married, when John's sexual desire is given greater importance in their union than Jean's feelings about her own body are given.

The lack of access to reliable contraception in this sort of community during the era in which the novel was set, gave Jean few choices when it came to making decisions about her own body. Her only option for avoiding pregnancy is abstinence from sexual intercourse, something with which John refuses to comply. Although having sex with someone when they do not want to is now a criminal offense, during this era it was legally impossible for a man to be found guilty of rape if the woman he raped was his wife. In this era, the legal contract of marriage was taken to represent consent under all circumstances, meaning that Jean is unable to refuse or stop John's sexual advances.

The tragedy of the legal, social, and religious restrictions placed on women during this era is laid bare when, as a result of her lack of agency when it comes to decisions about her body, Jean takes her own life and the lives of her baby twins after the trauma of discovering she is pregnant again ruins her mental and physical wellbeing.

However, the possibility of a consensual and life-affirming understanding of sexual relations is depicted later in the novel when Chris is able to assert a greater degree of control over her body than had been available to her mother. Although initially unsettled by her pregnancy, Chris's experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing are mostly positive. Chris still does not have access to safe and reliable contraception meaning that she needs to abstain from further intercourse with Ewan in order to avoid further pregnancies. In an echo of the abusive dynamic that existed between John and Jean, Ewan becomes enraged with Chris over her decision and chooses instead to visit prostitutes in Aberdeen. Chris's sexual freedom and her assertion of control over her own body are symbolized by her decision to have sex with Rob, a man whom she deeply cares about despite being married to someone else.

Men in the novel face negative consequences as a result of their sexual behavior, but not to the same extent as the women. John loses his wife, Chae was bullied into an unhappy marriage, and Ewan and Reverend Gibbon are gossiped about as a result of their sexual behavior. The Prelude indicates that this kind of sexual indiscretion was by no means a modern phenomenon by recounting the tale of a noblewoman who had resided in Kinraddie castle who had a baby by a man other than her husband after she struggled to conceive.



Community Values and Socialism

The theme of Community Values and Socialism is represented by the characters Chae Strachan and Long Rob of the Mill. Chae Strachan is the novel's overt socialist who spends his time telling other people that everyone should have an equal amount of money and be treated equally, even going so far as disrupting a political meeting in order to make his opinions known.

The positive effects of Chae's life philosophy are demonstrated through his relationship to other people in the town. When Chae's barn catches fire, the fact that he is known in the community as a fair man who will take care of everyone, not just his own family, means that the rest of the community volunteer without question to help him save his family and livestock when he is confronted with disaster. Continuing the spirit of solidarity and community support that defines Chae's political philosophy, he also offers his own help to other Kinraddie residents in their hour of need. Chae is particularly supportive of Chris, developing a system with her when her father is ill so that she could summon Chae if she needed any help.

The bonds of community are depicted in the novel as being stronger than the bonds of family during the thunderstorm which kills one of Chris's horses. Although her Aunt Janet and Uncle Tam are staying at the farm with her when the thunder storm occurs, neither one of them agree to help Chris protect her livestock from the danger of the lightning, leaving her to go into the night alone with only a lamp to guide her. Despite this poor show of solidarity from Chris's relations, she is not left alone once she gets outside because she discovers Chae Strachan and Ewan Tavendale have both ventured out into the night in case she needed help bringing in her horses.

The positive aspects of the community values in Kinraddie reach their peak at Chris and Ewan's wedding where the entire community show up at Blawearie to celebrate their marriage and to join together in singing traditional Scottish songs.

The dark side of the intense power of community in Kinraddie was felt after the advent of World War One in which authority figures such as Reverend Gibbon seek to hold onto their influence in the community by pandering to divisive and aggressive patriotic feelings amongst the residents. This results in a number of Kinraddie men attempting to physically assault Long Rob of the Mill out of a misplaced belief that his anti-War beliefs meant that he was pro-German. After Rob returns from prison where he had been violently mistreated by the police in punishment for being a conscientious objector to the war, all of Kinraddie turn their backs on him and refuse to do their business at the Mill. The only exception is Chris who continues to embody the old community values of Kinraddie by taking care of Rob and feeding him when he can't afford his own food. Rob returns the favor by helping Chris farm her land after Ewan leaves for the war.



Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Motherhood

The themes of Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Motherhood are represented by the characters Jean Guthrie and Chris Guthrie who have wildly different experiences of these rites of passage during their lives.

The limits placed on Jean's freedom as a woman during her lifetime lead to the slow destruction of her physical and mental wellbeing with little to nothing that Jean can do to escape her life circumstances. John's sexual attraction to Jean became her burden to bear in both a literal and metaphorical sense as she was left to deal with the psychological fallout of going through so many harrowing births as well as literally bearing the burden of John's babies through her six pregnancies. The experience of childbirth itself is traumatic for Jean when the twins are born which made her unwilling to go through the experience again, prompting a psychological breakdown which results in her murdering the twins before committing suicide when she discovers she is pregnant for the sixth time. Jean's death marks the end of a period in Chris's life when she feels like a child and begins a period when Chris is expected to fulfill the duties of an adult woman.

Due to her mother's disastrous experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood, Chris is understandably ambivalent when she first discovers that she is pregnant with Ewan's baby. Throughout the early chapters of the novel, the author depicts Chris as not being properly informed about pregnancy and how it occurs. When Jean gives birth to the twins, Chris is confused by Will's suggestion that it was their father's fault that she was pregnant again. Later, on her wedding day, Chris considers asking one of the female guests to explain the practicalities of conception and pregnancy to her before concluding that she will work it out on her own soon enough.

Jean's tragic life story creates tension and dread when Chris's pregnancy is first revealed, and when Chris contemplates suicide the reader is made to worry that her life story might follow the same distressing course as her mother's. However Chris's experience of childbirth is relatively easy and uncomplicated and – unlike her mother – Chris is able to abstain from further sexual intercourse so as to avoid another unwanted pregnancy after the birth of Ewan junior. However, Chris still suffers harsh consequences from her decision to assert control over her own body when Ewan insists that her desire to avoid an unwanted pregnancy justifies him having sex with prostitutes in Aberdeen.

Motherhood ultimately destroys Jean and, in a sense, destroys Chris too. Chris's character struggles throughout the novel with a sense of conflicting identities which she is forced to choose between and her pregnancy causes her to abandon her old identity as Chris Guthrie and embrace a new identity as Chris Tavendale, a wife and mother. Despite this ostensibly negative depiction of motherhood, Chris and Ewan junior are shown to have a close and supportive relationship and the final moment of the novel shows them on the cusp of becoming part of a new family unit with the Reverend Colquhoun.

Styles

Point of View

The novel is written mostly in the third person with an omniscient narrator, with occasional discrepancies. An example of one such discrepancy is the depiction of the aftermath of Jean's suicide, in which the narrative voice appears to be Chris herself reflecting on how she felt at the time, from some undefined moment in the future: "So long as that and so near as that, you'd thought of the hours and days as a dark, cold pit you'd never escape" (74). This fracture in the narrative voice reflects the fracture in Chris's psyche which occurs as a result of her mother's death.

The main body of novel is told from the perspective of Chris Guthrie (later Chris Tavendale), apart from a few key exceptions including the Prologue and Epilude which are written from the perspective of an outside observer of Kinraddie; a handful of brief interludes told from the perspective of characters such as Long Rob of the Mill; and an extended section told from the perspective of Chae Strachan in which he reflects on the drastic and irrevocable changes that had occurred in Kinraddie in between his decision to leave to fight for the British army in France and his return to Kinraddie on leave.

The technique of bookending the novel with two sections told from the perspective of someone viewing the town as a whole – rather than through the lens of just one resident's life – gives the reader a less biased insight into the community, allowing the author to include snippets and details from the lives of the minor characters which could not be included in sections told from Chris's perspective because she wasn't personally a witness to some of these moments and events.

Language and Meaning

The most distinctive aspect of the novel's language is its use of Scots dialect. The use of this dialect furthers the novel's theme of history by connecting its characters and narrator to an old way of speaking that was gradually dying out at the time when the novel was set. There is tension throughout the novel – and, indeed, throughout Scottish history – between Scotland and England, with Scotland representing tradition, history, and community values in the novel and England representing progress, the future, and a focus on profit rather than people. Although many in Kinraddie bemoan the growing influence of the English language over people who grew up speaking Scots dialect, Chae Strachan argues that it is necessary for young people to adapt to new language use in order to make the most of out of their opportunities in life.

The author asks for leniency in criticism of his use of the English language in the foreword to the novel, explaining the difficulties of trying to give an accurate picture of the cadences and idiosyncracies of a way of speaking that had since fallen out of literary usage. Through repetition and the analysis of context it is possible for a modern



day non-Scottish reader to understand dialect terms used in the novel - such as “quean” for “girl” and “loup” for “jump” – without having to consult a glossary.

The language has a poetic, lyrical quality especially in its descriptions of the Scottish landscape. The use of this language connects Chris with the natural environment, for example in the first moment that her character is introduced in the novel the author connects Chris’s solo figure with the beauty of the surrounding Scottish landscape: “Below and around where Chris Guthrie lay the June moors whispered and rustled and shook their cloaks, yellow with broom and powdered faintly with purple, that was the heather but not the full passion of its colour yet (33).”

Structure

The novel is structured into three distinct sections: the Prelude, the Song, and the Epilude. Within this, The Song is split into a further four sections which are named after different processes in the agricultural cycle of the seasons and which also relate to the different phases of Chris’s life which are depicted in each chapter: Ploughing, Drilling, Seed-time, and Harvest.

The Prelude is concerned with the past and the estate of Kinraddie throughout its history prior to the arrival of Chris Guthrie in the first chapter of The Song. The Song itself deals with a particular phase in the history of Kinraddie in between the establishment of a small number of relatively large farms and the destruction of the community brought about by World War One, a phase which corresponds with the coming-of-age of the novel’s protagonist Chris Guthrie. Ploughing refers to the preparation of agricultural land for the later farming and corresponds to Chris’s childhood; drilling is a process of preparing the land for the later planting of bulbs and seeds, which corresponds with Chris’s growing independence; Seed-time is the planting of new life to be brought forth later and corresponds to Chris becoming pregnant; and harvest refers to the collection of the fruits of the farm labor and the birth of Chris’s baby.

The Epilude stays with Chris as the central figure but is heavily focused on the future and what is to come, rather than looking back on events or discussing history as the Prelude does. The focus of the Epilude is on how the new socialist Reverend will bring about change in Kinraddie and an optimistic glimpse into Chris’s future happiness through the news that she and the Reverend are to be married.



Quotes

Kinraddie Castle that year, they tell, had but a young bride new home and she had no issue of her body, and the month went by and she rode to the Abbey of Aberbrothock where the good Abbot, John, was her cousin, and told him of her trouble and how the line of Kinraddie was like to die. So he lay with her, that was September, and next year a boy was born to the young bride.

-- Narration (Prelude paragraph 4)

Importance: The tales of gossip and sexual indiscretion during the historically-focused prologue show how people had behaved in the same ways throughout history and that there was nothing especially remarkable or modern about the behavior of the characters in Kinraddie at the start of the twentieth century.

And he had woods and of fir and larch and pine planted to shield the long, bleak slopes.

-- Narration (Prelude paragraph First section, final paragraph)

Importance: The woods planted by Cospatric Kinraddie during the nineteenth century usher in a new era of larger farms in Kinraddie, an era that is brought to a close by the end of the novel when the trees are cut down in order to supply fuel for the British war effort. Chae Strachan correctly predicts that this will end the farming life of the village as he knows it.

For he wasn't well liked by them that set themselves up for gentry, Chae, being a socialist creature and believing we should all have the same amount of silver and there shouldn't be rich and poor and that one man was as good as another.

-- Narration (Prelude paragraph Fourth section, paragraph 3)

Importance: This quotation summarizes Chae's political attitude: not an attack on the rich, but a deeply held belief that no man should be treated as better than another man simply due to the amount of money he had access to at birth.

Below and around where Chris Guthrie lay the June moors whispered and rustled and shook their cloaks, yellow with broom and powdered faintly with purple, that was the heather but not the full passion of its colour yet.

-- Narration (chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: This introduces Chris Guthrie as the protagonist in the novel which immediately and intimately connects her to the land of Kinraddie, setting up the novel's structure of tying in the changing seasons and cycles of the land with the changing seasons and cycles of Chris's life.

So that was the beginning of their lives together, she was sweet and kind to him, but he mightn't touch her, his face would go black with rage at her because of that sweetness that tempted his soul to hell.

-- Narration (chapter 1 paragraph Second section, paragraph 4)



Importance: The early years of Jean and John's relationship were characterized by a violent and uncontrollable lust on John's part, foreshadowing the fact that John's later control over their sexual relationship will ultimately lead to the destruction of Jean's mental and physical welfare.

That died, and the Chris of the books died with it, or you folded them up in their paper tissue and laid them away by the dark, quiet corpse that was your childhood.

-- Narration (chapter 2 paragraph 3)

Importance: The first of the many shifts in identity that Chris endures throughout the novel occurs after her mother's death, when the need for her to take over the women's work at the farm means that Chris has to give up going to college and, as a consequence, give up her dreams of pursuing her creativity and intellect.

And then Will spoke up, he cared not a fig for father now. All in a night it seemed the knowledge had come to him that father wouldn't dare strike him again, he bought an old bicycle and would ride off in an evening as he pleased, his face cold and hard when he caught the glint of father's eye.

-- Narration (chapter 2 paragraph Second section, paragraph 2)

Importance: Will's gradual maturity in the novel is shown through his changing attitude to his father's violent temper. As a child, Will is terrified of John. His lack of fear – and his trips on his bicycle to visit Mollie Douglas in Drumlithie – build towards his eventual elopement and departure from Scotland, which signifies his complete independence from his family.

But at the time a thing fine and shining it had been, she hadn't cared if folk deemed her heartless and godless – fine she thought it, a prayer prayed and answered, him dead at last with his glooming and glaring, his whistlings and whisperings.

-- Narration (chapter 3 paragraph Second section, paragraph 1)

Importance: Chris's initial reaction to her father's death is one of joy because it relieves her from the difficulties of caring for him during his sickness, and tolerating his abusive sexual advances towards her. Chris's indifference to the opinions of others eventually allows her to assist Rob, and develop a brief love affair with him, when no one else in Kinraddie will associate with him.

So she raised her voice and called to him and he came.

-- Narration (chapter 3 paragraph Final)

Importance: Chris decides not to commit suicide when she is pregnant and instead decides to reconcile with Ewan after he physically assaults her. Later in the novel, after another of Ewan's violent and abusive episodes, he waits in expectation of Chris calling after to him so they can reconcile but she doesn't do it, making their parting the last time they ever see each other.



For the next Sabbath day, when another great crowd came down to the kirk to hear him preach, they got all the patriotism they could wish, the minister said that the Kaiser was the Antichrist, and that until this foul evil had been swept from the earth there could never be peace nor progress again.

-- Narration (chapter 4 paragraph Fifth section, paragraph 9)

Importance: The hypocrisy of the people of Kinraddie regarding WW1 is symbolized by Reverend Gibbon and his decision to become pro-war after his pro-German sermon proves unpopular. The ravings of misguided and bigoted people leads to attacks on people like Long Rob of the Mill who stands by his own beliefs in the face of prejudice, mistreatment, and injustice.

So you're another damned pro-German as well, are you? There's over-many of your kind in Kinraddie.

-- Kirsty Strachan (chapter 4 paragraph Fifth section, paragraph 8)

Importance: Kirsty's attitude towards Chris's indifference regarding the war was symbolic of the deterioration of community values and the spirit of kindness which occurs in Kinraddie after the start of the war.

But they saw the minister was standing behind her, waiting for her, they'd the last of the light with them up there, and maybe they didn't need it or heed it, you can do without the day if you've a lamp quiet-lighted and kind in your heart.

-- Narration (Epilude paragraph Final)

Importance: The final moment of the novel hints at a happy future for Chris, and depicts her as the last surviving light of an era in Kinraddie that is destroyed during the course of the novel.