



SUNSET SONG — STUDY GUIDE

Author: Lewis Grassic Gibbon (pen name of James Leslie Mitchell)

Published: 1932

Genre: Scottish Modernist Novel / Regional Realism

Narrative Style: Third-person with lyrical Scots-inflected narration

Setting: Early 20th-century rural Scotland (Kinraddie, The Mearns)

Why it's studied: Major Scottish classic exploring identity, land, community, gender, hardship, and national change. A core SQA Scottish text at National 5 and Higher.

1. Introduction

Sunset Song tells the coming-of-age story of **Chris Guthrie**, a bright young woman growing up in the rural farming community of Kinraddie. Torn between her love for the land and the opportunities of education, Chris experiences personal tragedy against the backdrop of major historical change, including the impact of WWI and the decline of the old rural way of life.

2. Plot Summary

Part 1: Ploughing

- Chris Guthrie grows up in a strict, struggling farming family.
- Her father, John Guthrie, is domineering and sometimes brutal.
- Chris is torn between two selves:
 - **The English Chris**, drawn to education
 - **The Scottish Chris**, drawn to the land and identity
- After tragedy — her mother's breakdown and suicide — Chris leaves school dreams behind to support the farm.

Part 2: Drilling

- Chris takes responsibility for the farm after her father's death.
- Kinraddie community life is introduced in depth.
- She becomes more rooted in the land and farming rhythms.

Part 3: Harvest

- Chris marries **Ewan Tavendale**.
- Initially tender, their marriage is strained by poverty and war.

- Ewan enlists in WWI; military training brutalises him.
- He returns home on leave violent and unrecognisable.
- Chris gives birth to their son, **Ewan**.

Part 4: The War

- Ewan is executed for desertion — a shame hidden by the authorities.
- Chris finds comfort in local minister **Robert Colquhoun**, who respects her strength.

Part 5: Harvest Home

- Kinraddie is permanently changed by war.
 - Chris endures but acknowledges the end of “the old Scotland.”
 - The land remains her anchor: “the land endures.”
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3. Setting & Context

The Mearns (Aberdeenshire)

- Richly described landscape; central symbol of permanence.
- Farming rhythms shape the narrative structure.

Historical Context

- Pre-WWI rural life → disrupted by war, social change, mechanisation.
- Decline of traditional communities.

Cultural Context

- Tension between Scots identity and English modernity.
 - Language reflects this split: poetic third-person Scots narration fused with English.
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4. Characters

Chris Guthrie

- Intelligent, hardworking, compassionate
- Torn between education and land
- Represents Scotland’s dual identity
- Endures trauma but remains strong

John Guthrie (Father)

- Harsh patriarch
- Embodies old-fashioned authority
- His abuse and rigid worldview shape Chris's struggles

Jean Guthrie (Mother)

- Broken by repeated pregnancies
- Her suicide is a major turning point

Ewan Tavendale

- Chris's husband
- Gentle early on, destroyed by war
- His execution symbolises waste and tragedy of conflict

Robert Colquhoun (Minister)

- Kind, thoughtful clergyman
- Represents spiritual and emotional renewal for Chris

Kinraddie Community

- Ensemble characters representing rural Scottish society
- Includes Chae Strachan, Long Rob, and others
- Their fates reflect cultural and social shifts

5. Themes

The Land

Central theme: land endures even as people change.
Chris's connection to the land symbolises identity and continuity.

Identity (Scotland vs Modernity)

Chris's inner split mirrors national tensions — Scots/English, rural/urban, traditional/modern.

Gender & Expectations

Chris's life shaped by motherhood, domestic work, and limited choices for women.

War & Loss

WWI devastates the community; Ewan's death highlights brutality and injustice.

Change & Continuity

Old rural world fades; new modern world emerges.
Novel laments loss but acknowledges progress.

Community

Strong sense of shared life, gossip, humour, and support — but also judgement and hardship.

6. Form, Structure & Language

Form

- Blend of realism and lyrical prose
- Strong Scots idiom in narration to reflect cultural authenticity
- Part of Gibbon's *A Scots Quair* trilogy

Structure

- Divided into seasonal/farming cycles
- Cyclical, reflecting life's rhythms and the endurance of land

Language

- Rich imagery and natural description
 - Scots dialect used to reflect emotion, place, and authenticity
 - Shifts in tone (gentle, harsh, poetic)
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7. Key Quotations

Identity

- "Chris ... the two Chrisses that fought for her."
→ Expresses her internal conflict.

The Land

- "But the land was forever."
→ Central theme: permanence of nature.

War

- "They took my Ewan and made him a beast."
→ War's transformative cruelty.

Change

- "The old Scotland was dead."
→ Loss of tradition.

Chris's Humanity

- "She loved the land with a kind of dogged passion."
→ Shows her rootedness.

8. Symbolism & Motifs

Land / Soil

- Stability, identity, Scotland itself.

Seasons

- Cycle of life; change and continuity.

Fire

- Destruction and cleansing (father's self-destruction).

Song

- Emotional expression, memory, and cultural heritage.

War

- Symbol of modern change destroying traditional life.

9. Important Scenes

- Opening depiction of the Guthrie family
- Jean's suicide
- John Guthrie's death
- Chris and Ewan's marriage and early love
- Ewan's violent return from training
- His execution
- Minister Colquhoun's support
- Chris's final reflection on the endurance of land

10. Writer's Purpose

Lewis Grassie Gibbon aims to:

- Celebrate and mourn rural Scotland
- Critique societal constraints, especially on women
- Explore identity through land and language
- Highlight the trauma of war
- Preserve a disappearing way of life

11. Sample Essay Questions

- **Theme:** How does Gibbon present the theme of change in *Sunset Song*?
- **Character:** Analyse Chris as a symbol of Scotland.
- **Setting:** How does the landscape reflect the themes of the novel?
- **Turning Point:** Discuss the significance of Ewan's death.
- **Language:** How does the use of Scots contribute to meaning?

12. Model PEA Paragraph

Point: Gibbon uses the land to symbolise endurance in a world of constant change.

Evidence: Chris reflects that "the land was forever."

Analysis: This suggests that while war, society, and identity shift painfully around her, the land

remains constant — giving Chris a sense of grounding and survival. It represents Scotland's enduring spirit despite historical upheaval.

13. Quick-Revision Checklist

- **Themes:** land, identity, change, war, gender
 - **Key characters:** Chris, Ewan, John, Jean, Robert
 - **Symbols:** land, seasons, song
 - **Quotes:** "two Chrisses", "land was forever", "old Scotland was dead"
 - **Turning points:** family tragedies, Ewan's transformation, Ewan's execution
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MINI-ESSAYS

Character: Chris Guthrie

Chris embodies the struggle between tradition and change in early-20th-century Scotland. Her dual identities—English-speaking Chris and Scots-speaking Chrissie—symbolise competing futures. Family suffering (her mother's suicide, John's brutality) forces Chris into adulthood early, yet the land offers continuity: the cyclical life of Kinraddie becomes her emotional anchor. Ewan's transformation by war reveals the destructive reach of modernity; his death devastates Chris but also roots her more firmly in the community. Gibbon's lyrical Scots prose frames Chris not as passive victim but as a figure of endurance whose strength comes from belonging to both soil and self. She survives because she holds contradictions—love and loss, individuality and tradition—in a single, steady heart.

Turning Point

A. Turning Point: Ewan's Death

War returns Ewan brutalised; his execution breaks Chris and yet binds her to the land. The turning point fuses private grief with public history; Kinraddie absorbs loss and endures, and so does Chris—through work, community, and the “enduring things.”

B. Symbolism: The Land, The Plough, The Kirk

- **Land:** permanence; the “soil of our fathers” outlasts men.
- **Plough:** labour as love; continuity through seasons.
- **Kirk:** stern moral order; comfort and constraint.

C. Setting Analysis

North-east Scotland, early 20th century: croft patterns, seasonal time, and war’s intrusion. Gibbon’s braided English/Scots prose *is* the landscape’s music.
