How Green Was My Valley

Richard Llewellyn

About the author
Richard Dafydd Vivian Llewellyn Lloyd was born in 1906, in Middlesex, near London. There is some controversy surrounding his place of birth, as he claimed he was born in St David’s, West Wales. His parents were Welsh and many of Llewellyn’s books are about life in Wales. The most famous is How Green Was My Valley published in 1939, and later made into a Hollywood movie in 1941. He started his working life in the hotel business in Italy, and later worked in the film business and as a journalist. Llewellyn married his first wife, Nona Sonstenby in 1952 and they divorced in 1968. His second wife was Susan Heimann, whom he married in 1974. He died on 30 November 1983.

Summary
The book tells the story of Huw Morgan and his life growing up in a mining village in a Welsh valley. Huw is part of a large family and we follow the ups and downs of their social, working and romantic lives. At the same time, a long running dispute with the mine bosses affects their working conditions and leads to the formation of unions, calls for strike action and causes in fighting amongst the miners. The story is told as a collection of memories as the now grown up Huw thinks back over his life, before he leaves the valley forever.

Chapters 1–2: Huw’s older brother, Ivor, marries Bronwen, a girl who Huw secretly loves even though he is only a child. Davy, the cleverest brother, wants to be a doctor, but he is too old and has to work down the mine. He is worried that there are problems ahead for the miners, and that they are going to lose their jobs to men who are prepared to work for less money. The miners go on strike. Their demands are not met and they go back to work for less money. Davy, a confirmed socialist and union man, becomes more militant and wants all the mines to go on strike a second time against their English employers, but his father is more moderate. An argument breaks out in the family and Davy and two of his brothers leave the house. Their father, Gwilym, disowns them but secretly he is very sad about the state of affairs. On a walk with Huw, he meets a group of miners. He tells them he believes in talking before fighting but this merely enrages them further. Later, Davy and the other boys return to the house and an uneasy peace is established.

Chapters 3–4: The mine owners give Huw’s father a better job, knowing that this will increase tensions in the community because he is almost alone in opposing further strikes. Huw’s mother decides to speak to the men. She and Huw go up the mountain at night and she confronts them. On the way back down there is an accident and Huw is seriously injured. He spends the next five years in bed, where he reads a lot and learns that things at the mine are really wrong. His love for his temporary nurse, Bronwen, becomes even stronger. Mr Gruffydd, a preacher from the local church, helps Huw to recover and eventually he is able to walk a few steps. A little later, Ianto, another of Huw’s brothers, returns from London bearing the sad news that his wife and baby have died. Trouble breaks out between the local shopkeeper, Mr Elias, and Huw’s family when they accuse him of stealing their turkeys. The turkeys are recovered and Elias swears he will leave the valley. Later, Mr Gruffydd talks to the men about the power of religion and how they should form a committee to speak in parliament about the terrible situation at the mines, but they don’t agree with him.

Chapters 5–6: Huw’s sister Angharad has been secretly seeing the mill owner’s son, Iestyn Evans, an Oxford-educated, well-spoken young man. Huw’s first day starts badly at the National school. He is forced to speak English, has a fight with some of the other boys and a school teacher, Mr Jonas, threatens him with a beating. Huw’s father, convinced his son needs to fight, secures the help of two professional fighters, Dai Bando and Cyfartha Lewis, to teach him. Some days later he gets into another fight, and this time Mr Jonas punishes him by hitting him with a stick, leaving his back scarred. Dai and Cyfartha go to the school and beat up Mr Jonas. The men
Chapters 11–12: Davy is not paid the correct amount for a week of work and the case goes to court. Davy wins the case by proving he has been a good worker. Ianto and Davy leave home in search of work abroad causing their mother much sadness. Meanwhile, the potential for serious trouble is increasing. The men are becoming irrational, fighting each other, planning to destroy the mine and threatening to attack the Morgan family. One night a policeman hits a man with his stick and war breaks out. Some of the men attack the mine, wanting to flood it, but they are beaten back by other miners wanting to protect it. Huw's father goes down the mine to check on things. When they realise the floodwater is rising, Huw, Dai and Cyfartha go down to find him. Huw finds his father barely alive under a pile of collapsed stones. His father gives one last prayer to God and dies. Huw returns the narrative to the present with memories of his grieving mother and the other people he has known in his 30-year life.

Background and themes

Personal loss: The theme of loss is highly prevalent in the story. Wives lose their husbands in mining accidents and their sons to the lure of opportunities in far away places, men lose their jobs, and lovers lose the opportunity to be together because of social constraints. The narrator, Huw, compensates for the loss of his family by holding an almost religious belief that they live on with him.

Physical and social destruction: The writer makes an analogous connection between the gradual falling apart of the mining community and the ever increasing slag heap of coal waste that is destroying the natural beauty of the valley.

Discussion activities

Chapters 1–2
While reading (p. 3, after ‘Then Ianto married a girl who was staying in the village with relatives.’)

1 Discuss: Put the students in small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions about marriage: Do you want to get married? What is the best age to get married? Is it a good idea to marry somebody with a similar age/background/or amount of money? Would you marry somebody of a different nationality? Do you think good looks are important in choosing a husband or wife?
How Green Was My Valley

After reading
2 Write and ask: Write What colour was Huw's mother's old cloth? on the board and elicit the answer (blue). Ask students to write another question about something in Chapters 1–2. Now have students stand up and walk around the classroom, asking and answering each other’s questions.

Chapters 3–4
While reading (p. 21, after 'I won't be a doctor,' I said.)
3 Game: Put the students in groups of four and tell them they are going to play the twenty questions game. Student A thinks of a profession in English. The other students have to guess the profession by asking questions. Student A can only reply 'yes', 'no' or 'sometimes.' If the others can guess the profession in less than twenty questions, they win. See Discussion activities key for example questions.

4 Write and guess: Write The owners gave Huw's father a worse job. on the board. Elicit which word is wrong from the students (better not worse.) Now students choose a sentence from Chapters 3–4 and rewrite it changing one word. Students walk around the classroom, reading out their sentences and the other students have to identify and correct the mistake.

Chapters 5–6
While reading (p. 41, after 'He turned away from her.')
5 Role play: Put the students in pairs and ask them to act out a conversation between Mr Gruffydd and Angharad. Mr Gruffydd has to point out all the reasons they can’t marry, and Angharad has to contradict him. See Discussion activities key for an example start to the conversation.

After reading
6 Write: Ask the students to write a summary of Chapters 5–6. Tell them the summary must be exactly 50 words long, not more or less. They then read out their stories to the rest of the class who vote for the best summary.

Chapters 7–8
While reading (p. 54, after 'He and Gwilym were going to America. ')
7 Discuss: Tell the students that they can spend one year living and working/studying in a foreign country. Ask them to discuss the following questions: Which country would you choose and why? Do you think you would like the food/weather/people? What problems could you have? Do you think you would miss your own country? What would you take with you to remind yourself of home? Do you think that you could live in another country for the rest of your life?

After reading
8 Pair work: Write the following words on the board: knees, Paris, 400, pigs, white, doctor, lonely, jealous. Ask the students talk and write in pairs to say how these words were used in Chapters 7–8.

Chapters 9–10
While reading (p. 61, after 'Poor, poor Mr Iestyn,' Mrs Nicholas said.)
9 Write: Put the students in pairs and tell them they are journalists on a magazine that writes about gossip. Tell them to write an article about Mr Gruffydd and Angharad’s relationship. They can use the information in the book and invent some of their own. Tell them to make it as scandalous and sensational as possible. The pairs then read their articles to the rest of the class.

After reading
10 Write and guess: Put students in pairs and ask them to choose a short paragraph from Chapters 9–10. Tell them to write it again, making five changes to words in the text. Students then read out their paragraphs to the other students who have to identify the mistakes.

Chapters 11–12
While reading (p. 77, after 'He was talking about socialism and the workers, and the beliefs of Karl Marx.')
11 Research: Tell the students that Marx lived in the nineteenth century, and that his writings have influenced many political thinkers since then. Ask them to look for information on the Internet about him and to write a short biography of the man. Students then give an oral presentation of what they have discovered.

After reading
12 Write and guess: Put the students in groups of four and tell them they are going to play the twenty questions game. Student A thinks of a profession in English. The other students have to guess the profession by asking questions. Student A can only reply 'yes', 'no' or 'sometimes.' If the others can guess the profession in less than twenty questions, they win. See Discussion activities key for example questions.

13 Discuss: Put the students in groups and ask them to discuss the following questions about the book: Did you like the book? Is this the type of book you would normally read? Do you think the writer's childhood was similar to Huw's? Who is the saddest character? Do you think the book would make a good film?