

## Source A – 20<sup>th</sup> Century literary non-fiction

This is an extract from an essay written in 1967 called *The Village that Lost its Children* by Laurie Lee. Aberfan was a small mining village in Wales. In 1966, many of its people, including children at a local school, were killed when heavy rain caused a landslide.

### The Village that Lost its Children

1 Few people had ever heard of Aberfan  
until disaster struck it. It was just  
another of the small mining villages  
lying tucked away in the South Wales  
5 valleys – a huddle of anonymous  
terraced houses of uniform ugliness  
unrelieved except for chapel and pub.

Its heart was the coal-pit, and its  
environment like the others – the debris  
10 of a slowly exhausting industry: a  
disused canal, some decaying rail-  
tracks, a river black as the Styx<sup>1</sup>, a  
general coating of grime over roofs and  
gardens, and the hills above blistered  
15 with a century of mining waste.



Such villages learned to accept a twilight world where most of the menfolk worked down the pits. Many died early, with their lungs full of coal-dust, and the life was traditionally grim and perilous. Disaster, in fact, was about the only news that ever came out of the valleys – the sudden explosion underground, miners entombed alive, or the silent death in the dark from gas. Wales and the world were long hardened to such news. But not to what happened in  
20 Aberfan.  
21

A coal-mine sends to the surface more waste than coal, and a mining village has to learn to live with it. It must be put somewhere or the mine would close, and it's too expensive to carry it far. So the tips grow everywhere, straddling the hillsides, nudging the houses like black-furred beasts. Almost everyone, from time to time, has seen danger in them, but mostly they are endured as a fact of life.  
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27 On the mountain above Aberfan there were seven such tips. The evening sun sank early behind them. To some of the younger generation they had always been there, as though dumped by the hand of God. They could be seen from the school windows, immediately below them, rising like black pyramids in the western sky. But they were not as solid as they  
30 looked; it was known that several had moved in the past, inching ominously down the mountain.

What was not known however was that the newest tip, number 7, was a killer with a rotten heart. It had been begun in Easter 1958, and was built on a mountain spring, most treacherous of all foundations. Gradually, over the years, the fatal seeping of water was  
35 turning Tip 7 into a mountain of moving muck.

Then one morning, out of the mist, the unthinkable happened, and the tip came down on the village. The children of Pantglas Junior School had just arrived in their classrooms and were right in the path of it. They were the first to be hit by the wave of stupifying filth which  
40 instantly smothered more than a hundred of them.

The catastrophe was not only the worst in Wales but an event of such wanton and indifferent cruelty it seemed to put to shame both man and God.

**Glossary**

<sup>1</sup>Styx – the Styx was a river in Greek mythology that was supposed to separate the world of the living from the world of the dead.

**Turn over for Source B**