

A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE

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1 THINKING OF STUDYING A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE AT WORCESTER SIXTH FORM COLLEGE?

Here at WSFC, we use the exam board EDUQAS for A-Level English Literature.

You can read more about the specification here:

<https://www.eduqas.co.uk/media/gkxh25ep/eduqas-a-level-english-lit-spec-from-2015-e.pdf>

Much of this document is in "teacher-speak" – but nevertheless it will be useful for you to have a look through it.

What will you study on the A-Level in English Literature?

You will study a mixture of novels, plays, and poetry.

Novels:

We Have Always Lived in the Castle by Shirley Jackson
All the Birds, Singing by Evie Wyld

Plays:

The Tempest by William Shakespeare
A Streetcar Named Desire by Tennessee Williams
The Duchess of Malfi by John Webster

Poetry:

Selected poems by Ted Hughes
Selected poems by Sylvia Plath
Paradise Lost Book 9 by John Milton

How will you study these texts?

- You will explore how writers create meaning using language and other literary techniques.
 - You will investigate how contexts (for example, biographical, social, historical, and literary) have affected the writing and reception of texts.
 - You will consider the links and connections between texts.
 - You will examine other writers' and readers' different interpretations of the texts you are studying.
- You will also learn how to craft knowledgeable, well-written, well-structured essays in a correct academic style.

2 TASK TO COMPLETE BEFORE SEPTEMBER

This will be checked in the first week of the course.

In addition to studying the texts mentioned above, you'll also face an "unseen" exam, in which you'll write about something you've not encountered before.

Please have a careful read of the following extract:

She stood on the platform watching the receding train. A few bushes hid the curve of the line; the white vapour rose above them, evaporating in the pale evening. A moment more and the last carriage would pass out of sight. The white gates swung forward slowly and closed over the line.

An oblong box painted reddish brown and tied with a rough rope lay on the seat beside her. The movement of her back and shoulders showed that the bundle she carried was a heavy one, the sharp bulging of the grey linen cloth that the weight was dead. She wore a faded yellow dress and a black jacket too warm for the day. A girl of twenty, short, strongly built, with short, strong arms. Her neck was plump, and her hair of so ordinary a brown that it passed unnoticed. The nose was too thick, but the nostrils were well formed. The eyes were grey, luminous, and veiled with dark lashes. But it was only when she laughed that her face lost its habitual expression, which was somewhat sullen; then it flowed with bright humour. She laughed now, showing a white line of almond-shaped teeth. The porter had asked her if she were afraid to leave her bundle with her box. The man lingered, for she was an attractive girl, but the station-master called him away to remove some luggage.

It was a barren country. Once the sea had crawled at high tide half-way up the sloping sides of those downs. It would do so now were it not for the shingle bank which its surging had thrown up along the coast. Between the shingle bank and the shore a weedy river flowed and the little town stood clamped together, its feet in the water's edge. There were decaying shipyards about the harbour, and wooden breakwaters stretched long, thin arms seawards for ships that did not come. On the other side of the railway apple blossoms showed above a white-washed wall; some market gardening was done in the low-lying fields, whence the downs rose in gradual ascents. On the first slope there was a fringe of trees. That was Woodview.

The girl gazed on this bleak country like one who saw it for the first time. She saw without perceiving, for her mind was occupied with personal consideration. She found it difficult to decide whether she should leave her bundle with her box. It hung heavy in her hand, and she did not know how far Woodview was from the station. At the end of the platform the station-master took her ticket, and she passed over the level-crossing still undecided. The lane began with iron railings, laurels, and French windows. She had been in service in such houses, and knew if she were engaged in any of them what her duties would be. But the life in Woodview was a great dream, and she could not imagine herself accomplishing all that would be required of her. There would be a butler, a footman, and a page; she would not mind the page—but the butler and footman, what would they think? There would be an upper-housemaid and an under-housemaid, and perhaps a lady's-maid, and maybe that these ladies had been abroad with the family. She had heard of France and Germany. Their conversation would, no doubt, turn on such subjects. Her silence would betray her. They would ask her what situations she had been in, and when they learned the truth she would have to leave disgraced. She had not sufficient money to pay for a ticket to London. But what excuse could she give to Lady Elwin, who had rescued her from Mrs. Dunbar and got her the place of kitchen-maid at Woodview? She must not go back. Her father would curse her, and perhaps beat her mother and her too. Ah! he would not dare to strike her again, and the girl's face flushed with shameful remembrance. And her little brothers and sisters would cry if she came back. They had little enough to eat as it was. Of course she must not go back. How silly of her to think of such a thing!

She smiled, and her face became as bright as the month: it was the first day of June. Still she would be glad when the first week was over. If she had only a dress to wear in the afternoons! The old yellow thing on her back would never do. But one of her cotton prints was pretty fresh; she must get a bit of red ribbon—that would make a difference. She had heard that the housemaids in places like Woodview always changed their dresses twice a day, and on Sundays went out in silk mantles and hats in the newest fashion. As for the lady's-maid, she of course had all her mistress's clothes, and walked with the

butler. What would such people think of a little girl like her! Her heart sank at the thought, and she sighed, anticipating much bitterness and disappointment. Even when her first quarter's wages came due she would hardly be able to buy herself a dress: they would want the money at home. Her quarter's wages! A month's wages most like, for she'd never be able to keep the place. No doubt all those fields belonged to the Squire, and those great trees too; they must be fine folk, quite as fine as Lady Elwin—finer, for she lived in a house like those near the station.

Now answer the following questions:

1 The character we find out about is called Esther. Write down some quotations from the extract that the writer uses to tell us about the setting and the location. Think carefully about some of the specific word choices used by the writer. What might the setting/location tell us about Esther's feelings?

2 One of Esther's key characteristics in this extract is a feeling of inadequacy or inferiority. Write down some quotations that the writer uses to indicate this feeling.

3 Write down some quotations from the extract which are specifically about Esther's appearance. Again, think carefully about some of the individual word choices. What are we being told about Esther through the presentation of her physical appearance?

4 The novel that this extract is from is, in part, a presentation of the vulnerabilities and difficulties faced by an unprivileged woman in the late 1800s. Write down some quotations from the extract which you think touch on the wider challenges faced by a person like Esther. What exactly are these challenges and difficulties?

3 OPTIONAL TASKS

TASK THREE

Read the following poem by Ted Hughes.

"Wind"

This house has been far out at sea all night,
The woods crashing through darkness, the booming hills,
Winds stampeding the fields under the window
Floundering black astride and blinding wet

Till day rose; then under an orange sky
The hills had new places, and wind wielded
Blade-light, luminous black and emerald,
Flexing like the lens of a mad eye.

At noon I scaled along the house-side as far as
The coal-house door. Once I looked up –
Through the brunt wind that dented the balls of my eyes
The tent of the hills drummed and strained its guyrope,

The fields quivering, the skyline a grimace,
At any second to bang and vanish with a flap:
The wind flung a magpie away and a black-
Back gull bent like an iron bar slowly. The house

Rang like some fine green goblet in the note
That any second would shatter it. Now deep
In chairs, in front of the great fire, we grip
Our hearts and cannot entertain book, thought,

Or each other. We watch the fire blazing,
And feel the roots of the house move, but sit on,
Seeing the window tremble to come in,
Hearing the stones cry out under the horizons.

Write 300 words about how Hughes presents the power of the wind. Write about what Hughes actually does in the poem – don't write anything that's not there. By this, I mean don't start trying to theorise that the poem is actually about, for example, homeless people. There's no evidence of this whatsoever – and an A-Level examiner will not be impressed by a reading which forces an "unevidenced" reading on the poem.

Consider these mini-questions:

- What is the wind able to do in the poem that indicates its great power?
- What does Hughes connect the wind to?
- How does the wind affect human relationships at the end of the poem?

TASK FOUR

Read the first part of the opening chapter of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. As you read, highlight any quotations which you think will help you to answer the following question: "How does Shirley Jackson present the character of Merricat in the first chapter of the novel?"

This task does not require you to actually do any writing. Just highlight all the quotations that you think you would need to answer the questions above.

My name is Mary Katherine Blackwood. I am eighteen years old, and I live with my sister Constance. I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf, because the two middle fingers on both my hands are the same length, but I have had to be content with what I had. I dislike washing myself, and dogs, and noise. I like my sister Constance, and Richard Plantagenet, and *Amanita phalloides*, the death-cup mushroom. Everyone else in my family is dead.

The last time I glanced at the library books on the kitchen shelf they were more than five months overdue, and I wondered whether I would have chosen differently if I had known that these were the last books, the ones which would stand forever on our kitchen shelf. We rarely moved things; the Blackwoods were never much of a family for restlessness and stirring. We dealt with the small surface transient objects, the books and the flowers and the spoons, but underneath we had always a solid foundation of stable possessions. We always put things back where they belonged. We dusted and swept under tables and chairs and beds and pictures and rugs and lamps, but we left them where they were; the tortoise-shell toilet set on our mother's dressing table was never off place by so much as a fraction of an inch. Blackwoods had always lived in our house, and kept their things in order; as soon as a new Blackwood wife moved in, a place was found for her belongings, and so our house was built up with layers of Blackwood property weighting it, and keeping it steady against the world.

It was on a Friday in late April that I brought the library books into our house. Fridays and Tuesdays were terrible days, because I had to go into the village. Someone had to go to the library, and the grocery; Constance never went past her own garden, and Uncle Julian could not. Therefore it was not pride that took me into the village twice a week, or even stubbornness, but only the simple need for books and food. It may have been pride that brought me into Stella's for a cup of coffee before I started home; I told myself it was pride and would not avoid going into Stella's no matter how much I wanted to be at home, but I knew, too, that Stella would see me pass if I did not go in, and perhaps think I was afraid, and that thought I could not endure.

"Good morning, Mary Katherine," Stella always said, reaching over to wipe the counter with a damp rag, "how are you today?" "Very well, thank you."

"And Constance Blackwood, is she well?"

"Very well, thank you."

"And how is he?"

"As well as can be expected. Black coffee, please."

If anyone else came in and sat down at the counter I would leave my coffee without seeming hurried, and leave, nodding goodbye to Stella. "Keep well," she always said automatically as I went out.

I chose the library books with care. There were books in our house, of course; our father's study had books covering two walls, but I liked fairy tales and books of history, and Constance liked books about food. Although Uncle Julian never took up a book, he liked to see Constance reading in the evenings while he worked at his papers, and sometimes he turned his head to look at her and nod.

"What are you reading, my dear? A pretty sight, a lady with a book."

"I'm reading something called *The Art of Cooking*, Uncle Julian."

"Admirable."

We never sat quietly for long, of course, with Uncle Julian in the room, but I do not recall that Constance and I have ever opened the library books which are still on our kitchen shelf. It was a fine April morning when I came out of the library; the sun was shining and the false glorious promises of spring were everywhere, showing oddly through the village grime. I remember that I stood on the library steps holding my books and looking for a minute at the soft hinted green in the branches against the sky and wishing, as I always did, that I could walk home across the sky instead of through the village. From the library steps I could cross the street directly and walk on the other side along to the grocery, but that meant that I must pass the general store and the men sitting in front. In this village the men stayed young and did the gossiping and the women aged with grey evil weariness and stood silently waiting for the men to get up and come home. I could leave the library and walk up the street on this side until I was opposite the grocery and then cross; that was preferable, although it took me past the post office and the Rochester house with the piles of rusted tin and the broken automobiles and the empty gas tins and the old mattresses and plumbing fixtures and wash tubs that the Harler family brought home and -- I genuinely believe -- loved.

The Rochester house was the loveliest in town and had once had a walnut-panelled library and a second-floor ballroom and a profusion of roses along the veranda; our mother had been born there and by rights it should have belonged to Constance. I decided as I always did that it would be safer to go past the post office and the Rochester house, although I disliked seeing the house where our mother was born. This side of the street was generally deserted in the morning, since it was shady, and after I went into the grocery I would in any case have to pass the general store to get home, and passing it going and coming was more than I could bear.

Outside the village, on Hill Road and River Road and Old Mountain, people like the Clarkes and the Carringtons had built new lovely homes. They had to come through the village to get to Hill Road and River Road because the main street of the village was also the main highway across the state, but the Clarke children and the Carrington boys went to private schools and the food in the Hill Road kitchens came from the towns and the city; mail was taken from the village post office by car along the River Road and up to Old Mountain, but the Mountain people mailed their letters in the towns and the River Road people had their hair cut in the city.

I was always puzzled that the people of the village, living in their dirty little houses on the main highway or out on Creek Road, smiled and nodded and waved when the Clarkes and the Carringtons drove by; if Helen Clarke came into Elbert's Grocery to pick up a can of tomato sauce or a pound of coffee her cook had forgotten everyone told her "Good morning," and said the weather was better today. The Clarkes' house is newer but no finer than the Blackwood house. Our father brought home the first piano ever seen in the village. The Carringtons own the paper mill but the Blackwoods own all the land between the highway and the river. The Shepherds of Old Mountain gave the village its town hall, which is white and peaked and set in a green lawn with a cannon in front. There was some talk once of putting in zoning laws in the village and tearing down the shacks on Creek Road and building up the whole village to match the town hall, but no one ever lifted a finger; maybe they thought the Blackwoods might take to attending town meetings if they did. The villagers get their hunting and fishing licenses in the town hall, and once a year the Clarkes and the Carringtons and the Shepherds attend town meeting and solemnly vote to get the Harler junk yard off Main Street and take away the benches in front of the general store, and each year the villagers gleefully outvote them. Past the town hall, bearing to the left, is Blackwood Road, which is the way home. Blackwood Road goes in a great circle around the Blackwood land and along every inch of Blackwood Road is a wire fence built by our father. Not far past the town hall is the big black rock which marks the entrance to the path where I unlock the gate and lock it behind me and go through the woods and am home.

The people of the village have always hated us.