



A-level

ENGLISH LITERATURE A

Paper 2B Texts in shared contexts: Modern times: Literature from 1945
to the present day

June 2024

Insert

Extract from *A Trick I Learned from Dead Men* by Kitty Aldridge, published in 2012

In the afternoon the lovely Lorelle drops off the sympathy blooms from Fleurtations. I toss away my yoghurt and hurry out when I see the van.

Hey, I say.

Hey, Lee, she says. All right?

Lorelle: One of life's optimists, always smiling. Possibly from working with flowers or she could've just been born like it. Happy as Larry, Derek calls her. Lorelle experiences the peaks and troughs of life, whereas here we're a lot more skewed being that we are merely death death death twenty-four seven.

It's not just her happy-go-luckiness, I like the gap between her front teeth, the freckle under her right eye, the way her brown eyes slant down. She has a piece of hair that collapses now and then over her face. She tucks it behind her ear. I put my hands in my pockets to stop me tucking it for her and getting done for harassment.

The phrase, dazzling smile, was made for Lorelle. Talk about knock you down, her smile could send you through a hedge. From her perspective life looks like one mad raving bender of birth, baptism, marriage, death. All the big dates in a human life. P'raps her view is as skewed as mine after all. Nice to have things in common. Saying that, we don't just natter about work. If I bring a brew from the office we discuss varied topics. Or sometimes we just stand with our tea, thinking on.

She has no flaws as far as I can tell other than when she parks the van she mounts the kerb but, I think to myself, So what? She could have her pick of men so I'm not taking anything for granted. I haven't asked her out yet. I don't want to frighten her off. Nice and easy. Tiptoe through the tulips.

What d'you call that? Derek is referring to Mrs Whitmarsh. I have finished Mrs Whitmarsh and reckoned her to look good for someone who is dead.

She looks grey, says Derek. She looks ill, son. Get some colour on her before the resus team arrive.

Despite Derek's superiority I do not take this lying down.

I was going for a natural look, I say.

Well, you've overdone it. She looks terrible, he says. Dear God. No one wants to see their relative looking dead, Lee. They want to see the face they loved back when, OK? An approximation of the good old days, Christmas morning after a nip of sherry. That's the look you're after, he says. Are you with me?

Yes, I say.

Derek smooths back his hair, fastens his waistcoat, turns on the tap to wash his hands. No good them going out looking worse than when they came in, he says. Get some sherry down her, glad tidings to all men, get some peace on earth. And get a move on.

Of all Derek's foibles, having the last word, to my mind, is the most grating.

*

I like to walk the long way. Blow the cobwebs. I forget about them afterwards, I don't take my work home. I like the wind pushing down Bursthill Lane from Cinder Hill, blows their old selves off me. Wind takes them, the deceased clients, off they go. I get the taste of the woods in my mouth and my legs know where to roam.

Welcome to Our Historic Village, it says on the sign.

OK, cheers!

There is a bird by the public footpath who whistles like a human, every day the same, like he's doing someone's windows with a bucket of suds. No sight of him, but still. I know he's there.

Buonasera, I say. He stops whistling for a moment.

I look for Crow. He waits on the telegraph wire by the postbox. He tilts his shiny eye.

Late again, Lee. You'll be late for your own funeral.

Such wit from a carrion bird.

You got nothing to crow about, I say.

That round goes to me, I reckon. Later, Mr Corvid.*

*

I always slam the door when I come in. I could just say, Hello, but only one of them would hear and neither would reply. I could say, I'm home! But what would it achieve?

First thing I see is the dirty dish stack, frying pan on top, upturned like a sombrero. Buenos dias.

The best view in the house is from the sink. I wash the dishes, watch the sun drop into the woods, pyrotechnics. The house makes a giant shadow of itself on the lane. I hang the tea towel on the cupboard door.

Lester has a beard. A result of his TV marathon. He has watched TV non-stop since she died. If you measured his beard you could p'raps even get the date she passed. Possible Les has broken a round-the-clock TV-watching record and none of us know it.

Reality TV is Lester's reality. He won't watch a quiz, game show or drama. The only good news is no news, he says.

What d'you want for dinner, baked potato or omelette?

No answer. Lately he doesn't reply. Gets on my nerves. Deaf is a political party in this house. Lester is tired of news since receiving the worst news he could have imagined. His plan now is to receive no news whatsoever, not even TV or radio. Easy to knock it, but. Seems to work for him. Just the job, as he would have once said.

I do omelette. I add peas and mushroom. Les has his with the reality people. Ned and me have ours with each other. Ned stirs his tea on and on, ting-a-ling. Jesus. Does your head.

**Mr Corvid is a nickname derived from 'corvidae', the Latin name for the bird family that includes the crow.*

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