



A-level

ENGLISH LITERATURE A

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

June 2023

Insert

Extract from *The Village*, a novel by Marghanita Laski, published in 1952

‘There was something else, Edith. I’ve never told anyone here before. We had a baby in Kenya, a boy. We called him Stanley. He was really a beautiful baby, everyone said he was. He died when he was three months. He’d just started to smile –’ Suddenly she collapsed, her face in her hands, choking with noisy ugly sobs.

Edith came beside her, put her arm round her shoulders. ‘It’s all right,’ she said. ‘It’s all right now, my dearie. I’ve got you. Everything’s all right now.’ She went on murmuring meaningless comforting little phrases, holding the other woman tightly to her, until Wendy’s sobs slackened and she began to grope in her pockets for her handkerchief. Then Edith moved away and silently started pouring out the tea.

Wendy said with a half-laugh, half-sob, ‘Listen, the dance music’s stopped. Edith,’ she said, mopping her eyes, twisting her handkerchief in her hands, ‘I don’t know how to apologise. I don’t know what came over me, making an exhibition of myself like that.’

‘There’s nothing to apologise for at all,’ said Edith. ‘We’re all of us that tired and overwrought these days anyway, and if you can’t have a good cry here tonight I don’t know when you can.’ She added almost casually, her face half-turned away, ‘I lost a baby too, you know. A little girl, mine was. It was my first, too.’ She sat down beside Wendy, and again the two women sipped their tea, talking now in soft relaxed voices of the children when young, of their husbands, their parents, remembering the little things that had made up their lives, made them what they were. Neither had ever talked like this to anyone before and never would again.

At last Wendy glanced up at the window and it was light. On a single impulse they both got up and went to the door, looking out at the village in the early morning light, at the Norman church and Dr Gregory’s long Georgian house on the north side of the Green, the dark cedars that spread over the wall from Miss Evadne’s garden on the short side, at the ugly new shops flanking the village hall and closing the triangle round the Green. The air was cool and sweet and no one was about. It was the first day after the war.

At last they moved back into the stuffy little room, smoothed the camp-beds, washed out the cups and the teapot for the last time, repacked their haversacks and slung them over their shoulders. Wendy locked the door behind them and hung the key in the not very secret place inside the porch, but still they lingered, unwilling finally to end this night and the years behind it.

‘There’s a lot of us will miss it,’ Edith said. ‘We’ve all of us felt at times, you know, how nice it was, like you and me being able to be together and friendly, just as if we were the same sort, if you know what I mean.’

‘I’ll miss it a lot too,’ Wendy said. There was no point in her saying that it could go on now, the friendliness and the companionship and the simple human liking of one woman for another. Both knew that this breaking down of social barriers was just one of the things you got out of the war, but it couldn’t go on.

Edith said, ‘I wonder if the Doctor will keep the weekly dances going. They were a real nice get-together if anything was.’

The barriers were rising. It was Wendy and her friends, not Edith and hers, to whom the Doctor had said, when the blackout had started, that it was everyone’s duty to support the dances, to ensure that those people had a bit of entertainment and didn’t sit brooding in their houses. There would be no point in the dances now, and she couldn’t explain to Edith why. She said, ‘Goodbye, Edith,’ and Edith said, ‘Goodbye, Mrs Trevor,’ and gravely, almost sacramentally, for the first and last time in their lives, the two women embraced and kissed each other.

Then they parted, Mrs Trevor going up the road to Wood View on Priory Hill where the gentry lived and Mrs Wilson going downhill on the other side, down Station Road among the working-classes.

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