

Introduction

This study guide is meant to support students in England and Wales preparing for GCSE exams in English and English literature. It may also be helpful to the general reader who is interested in the stories of Penelope Lively. If the guide is used as preparation for a written exam, then all the activities suggested here may be done in writing or orally, as students and teachers wish. Some of the activities here can be used also for assessment in speaking and listening, in original writing and in wider reading.

The guide is too long to read from start to finish, and I hope no one would ever want to. Use the headings to find the bits you need, **as** and **when** you need them. If you are a teacher, look for the many prompts for activities. Most can be done in speech or writing or using Internet technologies. If you are using this guide on a computer system, then you ought to open the application software you think most helpful for various tasks, as you see the need for it.

What happens in *The Darkness Out There*?

The Darkness Out There is a short story from Penelope Lively's collection *Pack of Cards*, published in 1984. If you have not yet read the story, then do so before you read this summary! It is the sort of story to which you can return several times. On a first reading the power of the story may make you miss some details.

The plot can be reduced to a few sentences:

- Two young people go to help an old lady with her housework.
- She tells them a story about something she did in the war.
- The young people are shocked by her story and leave.

This is a slightly more detailed account:

Sandra and Kerry (a boy) are in a club, at school, run by Miss Hammond. The club members help people in the community. One Saturday Sandra and Kerry go to the house of an old lady, Mrs. Rutter. When they have done the errands, they ask her about a local wood, which is meant to be haunted. Mrs. Rutter knows the true story behind the popular version.

During the Second World War a German aeroplane was shot down and crashed in the wood. Mrs. Rutter and her sister were the first people on the scene. They saw that one of the crew was still alive, but trapped in the aircraft. They left him and returned the next night, knowing that he was dying in agony. Mrs. Rutter is not ashamed of what she did, and explains it in terms of strict revenge, for the death of her husband, who was killed in Belgium at the start of the war.

Sandra is shocked but it is Kerry who takes the initiative. As directly as he can he insists that he must leave. As soon as he is out of the house, he speaks of his horror at Mrs. Rutter and his sympathy for the German.

The themes of this story

This is a story in which ideas are very important – probably more so than characters. The most obvious theme is the contrast between appearance and reality, how things seem and how things are. This general contrast is found in many more specific contrasts.

Darkness and light

This is important enough to the author for her to refer to it in the title of the story. And it is both literal darkness and light (the sunshine in which Sandra walks, the darkness of the wood) and a metaphorical contrast between evil and good.

First impressions

Sandra does not think well of Kerry at first, but she comes to see that he is a strong character. Mrs. Rutter appears at first as a stereotype of a sweet little old lady, but is revealed as a cold-blooded, selfish and vengeful woman.

Good neighbours

Sandra and Kerry (and Miss Hammond) try to be good neighbours. They contrast clearly with Mrs. Rutter who sees the world as divided into friend and foe. This can be amplified into a contrast of values – Kerry sees at once what Mrs. Rutter should have done. She does not even understand his moral sense. She thinks more about the inconvenience of the rain, than a dying man's mortal agony.

Past, present and future

The story contrasts time, but in two directions – from the starting point of the present day, Sandra imagines the future, in idealized terms, while Mrs. Rutter recalls the past in its horrific reality.

Youth and age

You might think that the story suggests that young people are better than the old. This is a possible reading. An alternative view would be that it challenges the popular ideas of the young as selfish and irresponsible. It shows that morality depends not on your age, but the sort of person you are. (Remember that Mrs. Rutter was not an old woman when she left the German to die in pain.)

The characters in the story

Sandra

Sandra is the first character we meet. Although this is a short story, we see how Sandra changes in the course of an afternoon. Outwardly she is unremarkable – she expects to be a secretary – but we note little details in the course of the story: Mrs. Rutter says that she is pretty, while someone else once remarked on her attractive feet; she makes her own clothes and dreams of having her own sewing machine; she judges Kerry at first by his appearance; she is superstitious about the wood.

When Kerry asks Mrs. Rutter about the war, Sandra does not want to listen – she tells him to “Shut up”. Why is this? Is she frightened? Is she superstitious? Is there some other reason?

Perhaps Sandra is more important as someone who observes and learns from things. She moves from a childish fear of rumours and tall stories to a realistic horror at the real darkness or evil in the world. “You could get people all wrong...” Does this refer to Mrs. Rutter, to Kerry, to both of them, or to all sorts of people, including these two? And is it right?

Kerry

Sandra does not really know Kerry, but she shares her friends’ opinion of him – “Kerry Stevens that none of her lot reckoned much on.” But at the end of the story she changes her mind. Why is this? Kerry seems a bit of a stereotype – he works part-time in a garage, and will have a full-time job there when he leaves school. He identifies Sandra’s dad by the make and colour of his car.

But there are clues that suggest Kerry is not as Sandra sees him – for example, he is ready to spend his free time helping old people, and he asks Mrs. Rutter what she wants them to do, then gets on with it steadily.

At the end of the story it is Kerry who takes the initiative, and passes judgement on Mrs. Rutter. In Sandra’s eyes “he had grown; he had got older and larger...”

Mrs. Rutter

Mrs. Rutter is the opposite of Kerry in a way. Pat calls her a “dear old thing”. She looks like the stereotype of a sweet old lady, calling Sandra “dear” and asking her if she is “courting”. She seems very interested in marriage and people’s having children. It may be that her own childlessness is something for which she blames the Germans, but she says she was a widow at thirty-nine, so it seems likely that she would not have had children anyway. She claims “I’ve got a sympathy with young people”. Perhaps she quite likes young people but she does not really have sympathy with them, as she is bitter and vengeful. Gradually her real character is revealed.

Pat (Miss Hammond)

Pat does not appear directly in the story, but we learn some things about her. She is unmarried and not very attractive in appearance. She is evidently a very thoughtful woman, who takes trouble for others and encourages young people to do the same. Sandra calls her Pat, which seems friendly but perhaps rather informal. Mrs. Rutter calls her “Miss Hammond” – is this out of politeness, or to emphasise Pat’s unmarried status?

The setting – time and place

In this story, both time and place are very important. The location is presented in ambiguous terms (we are not sure how to see it). In some ways it is a picture postcard view of the country – we first see Sandra walking through flowers. There are lists of plants and birds. But in the middle of the scene is the dark wood, with its rumours of ghostly voices and sexual assaults. At the end of the story, the place has not changed, but now Sandra sees it as it really is. She has learned the true nature of evil, instead of the myths.

The story is set in the present day more or less. (It was published in 1984 in a collection called *Pack of Cards*.) A few details make it seem a little dated. But the present is a point from which people look forwards or backwards. Sandra looks forward in a vague fantasy (“One day, this year, next year, sometime...”) but she lacks a vivid imagination. The dream has one precise detail – a Singer (sewing machine) which “does zig-zag stitch”. Kerry looks forward practically to when he leaves school and works at the garage. But Mrs. Rutter looks back. She recalls her husband as a “lovely man”, but his death seems to have brought her own life to an end. She has not remarried, and has no children. It is as if the only thing she lives for are memories – of her brief marriage, and long widowhood. She relishes the recollection of leaving the airman to suffer.

Penelope Lively’s technique

Viewpoint

The story is told from Sandra’s viewpoint. But it is written in the third person. This means the narrative uses personal pronouns and possessive forms like “he, she, him, her, his, her” (In case you are puzzled by these numbers, the first person is “I” and the second person “you”.)

We do, however, see other viewpoints as people speak – notably those of Mrs. Rutter and of Kerry. So it is possible for the reader to compare them.

As you read the story do you see things from one viewpoint or does your viewpoint change?

Does the author manage to show convincingly the viewpoint of characters younger than herself?

Dialogue

The story relies a lot on dialogue. In places it is almost like a play – in fact the story would be easy to dramatize for TV or radio. At first the dialogue comes in short passages surrounded by narrative. But as Mrs. Rutter tells her story, then the conversation dominates.

Notice how Kerry is interested in the type of aeroplane, asking if was a Messerschmitt (it could be a Messerschmitt Me 110, two-seater fighter-bomber, but equally could be any one of many other twin seat aeroplanes types). Mrs. Rutter does not know this, but she does know the human story, from experience.

Sometimes, a little detail in conversation tell you a lot. What is the effect of the extract below?

“There weren’t any flames; it was just stuck there in the ground, end up, with mess everywhere. Drop more milk, dear, if you don’t mind.”

Mrs. Rutter mentions the rain “bucketing down” and her bike’s puncture, to explain her reluctance to let the authorities know about the German plane. What is the effect of this on the reader?

At the start of the story Kerry controls his language – Sandra shouts “Christ!” when he jumps out at her. But after he leaves Nether Cottage, he swears freely: “old bitch...poor sod...two bloody nights...Christ!” Why does he do this?

Language

Pronouns and names

Sandra is the central character in the story. The reader learns her name from Pat’s speech about Mrs. Rutter in the opening paragraph. How many more times does it appear in the text? Check – are you surprised by what you find? Sandra is identified mostly by the pronouns “she” and “her”, or by the noun-phrase “the girl”. Mrs. Rutter is sometimes named and sometimes “the woman”. Kerry is occasionally “the boy”, but he seems to keep his name more than the other two. Can you think of why Penelope Lively has done this? Is it deliberate or accidental? Did you notice it before you checked? What is its effect on you?

Standard and non-standard forms

Sometimes English teachers insist on “proper” or standard forms. Does Penelope Lively use standard forms throughout this story, or can you find things of which some readers might disapprove?

What is the effect of words or phrases like these: “**polleny** summer grass”, “watching **telly**”, “it’s if you’re **nervy** you **get** bothered”?

The author suggests that there are different varieties of spoken English, as Sandra thinks of how Pat describes old people:

“Ever so grateful the old poppets was what Pat said, not that you’d put it quite like that yourself.”

Penelope Lively also uses non-standard grammar, writing single words or phrases, without a verb as sentences (what are sometimes called minor sentences):

- “Packer’s End.”
- “Two enormous blokes, sort of gypsy types.”
- “One day.”
- “Not Susie. Not Liz either.”

In other places, by contrast, the author uses a very formal and controlled literary style:

“When she returned, the old woman was back in the armchair, a composite chintzy mass from which cushions oozed and her voice flowed softly on.”

The effect is to suggest that some parts of the narrative are in Sandra’s own voice – as if the non-standard phrases are her thoughts. The more formal and controlled prose gives a more detached viewpoint.

Simile and metaphor

The story is full of word pictures.

Some of these are similes (which make an explicit comparison): “a speck like a pin-head”, “her eyes investigated, quick as mice” and “like lines from a song” – explain the effect of these similes, and any others you can find.

More often, though, Ms. Lively uses metaphors (where the comparison is implied): “a creamy smiling pool of a face”, “a no-man’s-land of willow herb”, “his chin was explosive with acne”, “a man with a tooth-brush moustache, his army cap slicing his forehead.”

Repetition

In your own writing you are often told to avoid repetition. Does Penelope Lively do this? Among repeated words are “spinney”, “sun” and “nervy”. Sometimes there are similar but not identical forms “sun”, “sunshine”, and “sunburn”. Most important of all is “darkness”. By repeating these key words, the author perhaps makes them more powerful and complex, in readiness for the final paragraphs.

Symbolism

The title of the story is obviously symbolic, but of what? At first the darkness seems a simple metaphor for the unknown evil in Packer's End. But at the end of the story, the evil is now known. The darkness is not evil outside in the wood. It is "out there" in the world of human experience, "in your head for ever like lines from a song...it was a part of you and you would never be without it, ever".

Structure

A good story has a beginning, a middle and an end, supposedly. Does this story follow the classic pattern? Look at this plan:

- Beginning: we find out why Sandra and Kerry are visiting Nether Cottage
- Middle, 1: Sandra talks to Mrs. Rutter while Kerry works outside
- Middle, 2: Mrs. Rutter tells her story
- Middle, 3: Kerry passes judgement on Mrs. Rutter
- End: Sandra sees the truth about darkness or evil in the world

Is this a good model of the structure of the story, or would you show it in some other way?

Make your own diagram to show the structure of the story.

Stereotyping

This story appears on the surface to be full of stereotypes. Here are some possible examples:

- Mrs. Carpenter who lacks a social conscience has platinum highlights and suede boots.
- Kerry knows about aeroplane makes and likes working with cars.
- Sandra dreams of a future where she falls in love, goes to places (she doesn't know the names) from travel brochures, gets a new sewing machine and works as a secretary.
- Some of the old people "were really nice".
- Pat talks about "old folks". She says, "Adopt a granny" and draws an old woman "with specs on the end of her nose and a shawl".
- A girl is assaulted by two "enormous blokes, sort of gypsy types".

How far does the story challenge or undermine these stereotypes, in your view? How many of these views are directly contradicted (shown to be false) by the end of the story?

Attitudes

Attitudes in the text

In this story, we see very obvious attitudes displayed by Sandra, Kerry and Mrs. Rutter. Give examples of some things that each of these thinks or believes.

Attitudes behind the text

If you study the text closely, you may have a sense of assumptions the author makes about the world, or of an outlook on life, which affects the way, she tells the story.

What are these attitudes or assumptions? If you find this question hard to answer, try this test. With which of the following statements do you agree or disagree? Penelope Lively

- dislikes travellers, thinks of them as “gypsies” and suggests they assault young women.
- thinks that it is all right, in wartime, to allow your enemy to die a slow and painful death.
- thinks that girls have no idea of the geography of foreign travel resorts
- likes sewing, home décor and tea-drinking
- has an obsession with hygiene and skin-care
- believes in ghosts
- thinks that real evil is in people not places
- likes old people much better than young people
- was born before the Second World War
- likes the countryside

Arrange these statements in order of probability. The first one should be the one you think most likely to be true. Give reasons for your view. At the end will be the statements you think least likely to be true. And in the middle may be some about which you lack the information to make up your mind.

Attitudes in the reader

As you read this story, how far do you think the author has understood what you like to read?

You may be surprised to find that the story was written to go in a collection of short stories for adult readers. Can you find anything in the text that suggests this?

Penelope Lively writes both for children and grown-up readers. Her adult books are not “grown-up” in the sense of being full of sex scenes, swearing and violence. But they may be hard for some readers, with sophisticated vocabulary and references. The teachers and examiners who chose the texts for the NEAB/AQA Anthology decided that *The Darkness Out There* is suitable for younger readers (it was in the previous Anthology also, so someone likes it a lot). Do you think it IS a good text for young people? Give reasons.

The author

As you read this story, how conscious are you of the author? What are her purposes, in your view?

Is this story written to entertain, to earn money, to warn, to frighten, to teach, to amuse, none of these, all of these? What do you think is the author's reason for writing?

Comparison

This story is full of comparisons and contrasts. Here are some examples:

- The beginning and end (generally)
- The reader's initial and final views of Kerry and Mrs. Rutter
- Sandra as she is before and after she hears Mrs. Rutter's story
- Fanciful and realistic ideas of evil
- Darkness and light
- Past and present
- Old people and young people
- Male and female characteristics
- Compassion and revenge

If you think this list is missing something, then add it. Choose the five most important areas of comparison or contrast and explain how they work.

Implied meaning

This story is full of implied meanings – things that are suggested but never spelled out. It is always rather ambiguous, and it is possible to miss much of what is going on.

This is especially true of the last two paragraphs. Read these now, several times. Comment (write or make notes for speaking) on the importance to the story of this section. Think about:

- How this passage is related to what comes before it
- How far it represents Sandra's view
- How far it is what the reader is meant to think
- The meaning(s) of "darkness" here and elsewhere
- The idea that "everything is not as it appears, oh no".

Readers and readings

Reading the text

Say what you think the story means in a literal sense and in terms of theme, character and setting. Look at details of imagery, language and symbolism.

Reading the author

Try to explain what, in your view, the author wants us to think at various points. In doing this you should refer to her narrative methods.

Reading the reading

Be prepared briefly to explain your own understanding of the story, and how this changes while you are reading it for the first time, and also on subsequent readings, where you notice more.

Responding to the text

Ideas for writing

Before you write **anything** you should have in mind a sense of your subject, your purpose and your audience – for example your subject is health promotion, your purpose is to help smokers quit and your audience is people buying tobacco products in the UK. So what you write is a short warning to appear on the packaging of cigarettes and other tobacco products.

In schools, pupils sometimes write things (or are told to do so) without asking these questions first. This can be fun, but in real publishing (which may have big costs but also can make profits) there is usually more focus. So, in writing her books, Penelope Lively thinks of a youth or adult audience, and her direct purpose is to entertain (perhaps) while here indirect purpose is to make enough money for her to keep writing. (Happily, she has had enough success to be able to write for as long as she feels able and interested, which is good news for her many fans.)

In writing this study guide, I have a very specific audience (or related set of audiences) in mind: students, teachers, trainee teachers and parents or tutors. If anyone else reads the guide, this is a bonus. The purpose is to help the students succeed in their work, while a second purpose is for them to enjoy some parts of it. I have other expectations – I do not expect ANYONE to read this from beginning to end in one sitting. It is set out in sections for users to dip into and pick and choose. (You will, anyway, so I may as well work with this, not against it.)

With some narratives you can add to the story (TV soap operas are designed to make this always a possibility). With others, the writer has already said all there is to say, and trying to extend the story can only harm it. Which kind of story is this one? The ending of this story does imply that there will be consequences in the future, but leaves this open. Will Kerry and Sandra become friends? It is possible but there is no reason to see this as likely. But there are things that one can

reasonably do with such a narrative – either to explore particular situations and characters in it, or to adapt it into different forms.

Changing the form – drama

This story is well suited for making into a script for dramatic performance. It could easily be adapted for television or radio, and could even make a fair stage play, with some slight changes.

For this task, you can produce several linked pieces of writing:

- a letter to Ms. Lively or her agent and publishers, seeking permission to adapt the work
- a pitch (proposal) for a TV or radio commissioning editor, explaining how you intend to adapt the drama for the new medium.
- an outline of the scenes and episodes into which you will divide the narrative (note that this need not stick to Penelope Lively's sequence)
- one or more scenes, including the opening episode of your drama

Several students could work together to write the whole drama. If it is very good, you could even submit it to a production company for real performance. If you develop a stage play, then you could find a theatre company that wants to perform it. Make sure that you find out about the conventions (rules, agreed style) for setting out scripts for the stage or radio and TV (similar but not quite the same).

Diary

Perhaps Kerry or Sandra keeps a diary. This is something young people do in reality as well as in fiction. We don't know about real diaries (they are private) but we know of fictitious diarists like Adrian Mole and Bridget Jones.

Write a series of entries for diaries kept by one or both of these characters. These should be for dates before and after the Good Neighbours Club visit to Mrs. Rutter. (It could be that this event will cause the diarist to give up writing for some time or for good!)

In doing this, you can adapt your style to the way you think these young people would write. How do we know this? We don't exactly, but there are big clues in Sandra's and Kerry's speech, in Sandra's thoughts, and even in their knowledge and ideas of the future (Kerry knows car and aeroplane types, while Sandra seems not to know names of foreign countries).

The Darkness out There – a true or typical war story?

Anyone who recalls the Second World War is likely to have been born at the very latest in 1940. You can do the sums to work out how old this makes them now. By talking to people who have memories or accounts of the war (or by reading them), you can begin to understand how typical

this story is or is not. (You could even write to Penelope Lively to find out her own view on this – she is old enough to remember the war.)

You can also compare this story with other fictitious accounts of how civilian populations are affected by war – anything from the UK TV sitcom *Dad's Army* to novels (and feature films) like Louis de Bernières' *Captain Correlli's Mandolin* or Mary Wesley's *The Camomile Lawn*.

Nothing like Mrs. Rutter's cruelty is ever shown in *Dad's Army* (written before the story) while some things like it DO happen in *The Camomile Lawn* (written at more or less the same time).

Making use of all of the real and fictitious accounts that you can, produce a short article (maximum 1,000 words) comparing them for their value as history. This can be written for a range of audiences and in different formats. For example:

- Script for short documentary broadcast on children's TV
- Article for weekend colour supplement magazine
- Double-page spread for history teaching book, aimed at teenage readers
- Text for display and/or audiotape, aimed at visitors to a museum or exhibition on the theme of the Home Front.

Guardian angels

One way to develop the story is to borrow the idea used by John Bunyan in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, perfected by Dickens in *A Christmas Carol* and used by Frank Capra in *It's a Wonderful Life* and J.B. Priestley in *An Inspector Calls*. This is that even the worst of people can be redeemed by the help of a guide, guardian angel or spirit who shows the offender why he or she is wrong and must change. Of course, you may feel that in this story Penelope Lively makes it clear that Mrs. Rutter is so set in her vengeful ways that she is NOT capable of such change, even with the help of a guiding spirit. (This is similar to what happens in *An Inspector Calls* where some of the characters reject the warning they are given.)

How you do this is open to many approaches. It can be prose narrative or drama (or some other form). You may want to get Mrs. Rutter to revisit her past, think about her present and look forward to her future. She needs to see the consequence of her actions and be able to choose clearly and deliberately to change or not to change.

Ideas for speaking

It is possible to combine writing and speaking by creating scripts and reading these aloud. But this section contains ideas for speaking without a script. For some tasks, you may want to have notes (as many real speakers do in situations where they need to recall a structure), cue cards or even an autocue. How do you do this? Put the cues into a text file on a PC. Change the font to a size you can read at a distance (say 72 point) and look at the screen while you speak. If you are being recorded onto videotape, then you can record with your camera beside the PC monitor, so you are looking into the camera, more or less. If you have a larger display (such as an interactive whiteboard, or a screen onto which you can project images from a PC) this is helpful. But you can also ask a friend to hold up cards on which you have written with marker pens!

Ideas for speaking work lend themselves to the use of computer technology and other audio-visual aids. For example, you can use presentation graphics software (such as Microsoft PowerPoint™) to deliver or to support what you do.

Interview or “hot seat”

In this task a group of students each take on the identity or character of someone in the story or who might have an interest in what happens. (So here, you could add journalists or police officers investigating Mrs. Rutter’s activities, or even the dead German or Mr. Rutter – include people, as your task requires them.)

Other students are an audience who have a reason to listen to the first group. At the most basic, you can do this as if you are a studio audience listening to a broadcast discussion. But you could be a jury, or a committee with some powers to vote, or members of a parliament.

What are the situations in which this could occur? Again, the possibilities are infinite. It could be that someone has found a body, and the coroner has held an enquiry or inquest (check out the difference) into the events that led to the death of the person whose body this is. On the other hand you could imagine that Mrs. Rutter has died, and the priest is trying to find out about her, so he can speak at her funeral. (She has no close neighbours or family). In this case, people like Kerry (perhaps ten years older) can speak to him or her about what they know.

Reading tasks

The guidance on this page should help you to read this text with understanding. For some exam courses you may wish to do assessed work in which you compare *The Darkness Out There* with some other text, including prose texts written before 1900. Among texts with similar themes are various novels and short stories by classic authors. The following list has suggestions for texts that you could study together with *The Darkness Out There*:

- Jane Austen – *Northanger Abbey* (extracts – real and imagined evil and Gothic elements)
- Charlotte Brontë – *Jane Eyre* (episodes to do with Bertha Rochester)
- Charles Dickens – *No.1 Branch Line*, *The Signalman*; *A Christmas Carol*
- Arthur Conan Doyle – various stories, but especially *The Hound of the Baskervilles*
- Henry James – *The Turn of the Screw* (real and imagined evil)
- H.G. Wells – *The Cone* (revenge story)

Other helpful Websites

Penelope Lively

<http://www.penelopelively.net/> - Penelope Lively's official site

Free texts

<http://promo.net/pg/index.html> - Project Gutenberg site

GCSE literature

<http://www.shunsley.eril.net/armoore/contents.htm#gcsewide> - links to wide reading tutorials

<http://www.devon.gov.uk/dcs/englishmedia/wider.htm> - ideas for GCSE wide reading