

AQA GCSE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 1: Explorations in creative reading and writing

SET E

Insert

The source that follows is:

Source A: 20th Century prose-fiction

Practical Magic by Alice Hoffman

An extract from the novel published in 1995.

Source A

After the death of their parents, Sally and Gillian are taken in by their elderly aunts who agree to raise them in their home. Many people in the town suspect that the Owens women are involved in witchcraft and magic.

For more than two hundred years, the Owens women have been blamed for everything that has gone wrong in town. If a damp spring arrived, if cows in the pasture gave milk that was runny with blood, if a colt¹ died of colic² or a baby was born with a red birthmark stamped onto its cheek, everyone believed that fate must have been twisted, at least a little, by those women over on Magnolia Street. It didn't matter what the problem was - lightning, or locusts, or a death by drowning. It didn't matter if the situation could be explained by logic, or science, or plain bad luck. As soon as there was a hint of trouble or the slightest misfortune, people began pointing their fingers and placing blame. Before long they'd convinced themselves that it wasn't safe to walk past the Owens house after dark, and only the most foolish neighbours would dare to peer over the black wrought-iron fence that circled the yard like a snake.

Inside the house there were no clocks and no mirrors and three locks on each and every door. Mice lived under the floorboards and in the walls and often could be found in the dresser drawers, where they ate the embroidered table cloths, as well as the lacy edges of the linen placemats. Fifteen different sorts of wood had been used for the window seats and the mantels, including golden oak, silver ash, and a peculiarly fragrant cherrywood that gave off the scent of ripe fruit even in the dead of winter, when every tree outside was nothing more than a leafless black stick. No matter how dusty the rest of the house might be, the woodwork never needed polishing. If you squinted, you could see your reflection right there in the wainscoting in the dining room or the bannister you held onto as you ran up the stairs. It was dark in every room, even at noon, and cool all through the heat of July. Anyone who dared to stand on the porch, where the ivy grew wild, could try for hours to look through the windows and never see a thing. It was the same looking out; the green-tinted window glass was so old and so thick that everything on the other side seemed like a dream, including the sky and the trees.

The little girls who lived up in the attic were sisters, only thirteen months apart in age. They were never told to go to bed before midnight or reminded to brush their teeth. No one cared if their clothes were wrinkled or if they spit on the street. All the while these little girls were growing up, they were allowed to sleep with their shoes on and draw funny faces on their bedroom walls with black crayons. They could drink cold Dr Peppers for breakfast, if that was what they craved, or eat marshmallow pies for dinner. They could climb onto the roof and sit perched on the slate peak, leaning back as far as possible, in order to spy the first star. There they would stay on windy March nights or humid August evenings, whispering, arguing over whether it was feasible for even the smallest wish to ever come true.

¹ a young male horse.

² severe pain in the abdomen caused by wind or obstruction in the intestines and suffered especially by babies.

The girls were being raised by their aunts, who, as much as they might have wanted to, simply couldn't turn their nieces away. The children, after all, were orphans whose careless parents were so much in love they failed to notice smoke emanating from the walls of the bungalow where they'd gone to enjoy a second honeymoon, after leaving the girls home with a baby-sitter. No wonder the sisters always shared a bed during storms; they were both terrified of thunder and could never speak above a whisper once the sky began to rumble. When they did finally doze off, their arms wrapped around each other, they often had the exact same dreams. There were times when they could complete each other's sentences; certainly each could close her eyes and guess what the other most desired for dessert on any given day.

END OF SOURCE



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