



ABSOLUTION

THE COMPLETE GUIDE AND RESOURCE

SAMPLE SECTION

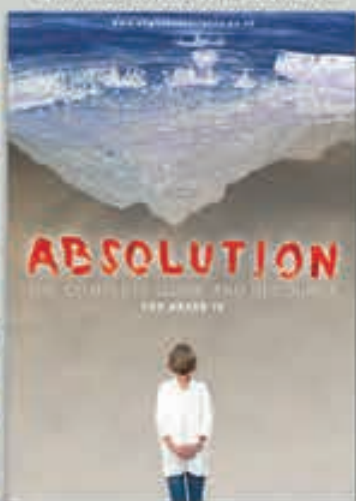


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The English Experience
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ABSOLUTION

Complete Guide and Resource

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All references made to the novel in this resource and the accompanying disc,
refer to the Atlantic Books edition of the novel (ISBN 978-0-85789-202-7)

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Foreword

About The English Experience

The English Experience is an independent South African publishing house that specialises in developing high-quality English and Life Orientation educational resources for IEB educators and students. The team of passionate, talented experts behind The English Experience works tirelessly to ensure that every resource encourages insight, growth and debate — enriching and challenging both educators and students — without losing sight of the important goal of examination readiness and success.

Focused on bringing the subject to life, every resource The English Experience publishes incorporates a range of features — including content and contextual questions and stimulating enrichment materials — designed to encourage a critical appreciation of the subject and to inspire the higher order thinking for which examiners are always looking.

The world-class English Experience team includes highly experienced educators, some with over 20 years of classroom experience, passionate literary experts in various fields, such as South African fiction, poetry and Shakespeare, fanatical historians and researchers, creative writers, skilled editors, pernickety proofreaders and obsessive fact checkers — together with spirited university lecturers and enthusiastic young minds who help ensure our approach remains unique and fresh.

While examination readiness and success is a non-negotiable, our aspiration is to inspire a genuine interest in, and love of, English literature.



Visit **www.englishexperience.co.za** to learn more about The English Experience and the range of educational resources the company publishes. You can scan this QR code to launch the site on your phone automatically. Please note, you will need to have the free 'Tag reader' app installed, which you can download from <http://gettag.mobi>

Our approach

Perhaps the toughest challenge with teaching literature to modern students is convincing them that the extra effort required in reading a novel — compared with the passive immediacy of movies and TV shows — is worth it. Decoding the language and bringing the text to life in the imagination can be taxing for young adults so it's perhaps not surprising that many of them see novels as works through which they have to slog to pass an examination.

This resource has been written with this reality in mind. Even though the language and settings of the novel are likely to be easily accessible to Grade 12 students, particular attention has been paid to providing the kind of context and insight necessary to help them fully empathise with the characters and their struggles.

We passionately believe that studying literature rewards us with a broader, deeper understanding of ourselves and those around us. That is why this resource does more than provide students with a comprehensive, detailed analysis of the text. It also encourages them to engage with the novel on a personal level and to uncover their own responses through the extensive chapter-specific questions, enrichment tasks and essay topics.

Throughout this resource, students are challenged to agree or disagree with both the characters and events in the novel and the analysis provided. By formulating and expressing their own responses to the opinions, ideas and themes explored in the novel, students are encouraged to reflect and grow as individuals, as well as students.

In the end, we have approached *Absolution* in the same way that we approach every text: with two, interrelated goals in mind. The first, non-negotiable objective is to ensure examination readiness and success. The second ambition is to inspire a genuine interest in, and appreciation of, the work being studied.

Using this resource

This comprehensive resource includes: an extensive introduction to the novel, the author and its historical background; detailed summaries; rich literary analyses; diverse, chapter-specific short questions, challenging essay questions and stimulating enrichment tasks. In short, everything needed to study the novel intensively and to bring it to life.

Background to the novel

We recommend working through the background to the novel section first so that students become familiar with the author, the novel and its historical context. Some students might have preconceived ideas about apartheid or gaps in their knowledge regarding the time period. This section of the resource has been written with such students in mind and particular attention has been paid to bringing the latter stages of this period to life and exploring important aspects, such as the armed struggle, media censorship and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The 'introduction to the novel' segment completes this section, giving students an initial overview and appreciation of the plot, characters and themes of the work, before they engage with the text itself.

By working through this comprehensive introductory section first, students will be prepared, engaged and able to read the novel with the right mindset.

Critical commentary

Once students have been prepared and have read through the novel, the chapter by chapter summaries and analyses provided in the critical commentary section ensure that a solid foundation of knowledge is laid.

Each chapter and sub-section is summarised and analysed separately. Extensive glossaries are included and students are required to engage with the content directly through chapter-specific questions. Students can then methodically build on this foundation, only dealing with the whole novel once they have worked through it step-by-step.

At the end of each main section and the summaries, there is a series of enrichment tasks and a wide selection of rigorous essay topics, ensuring that students also tackle the novel in its entirety.

Literary analysis

The literary analysis section includes analyses of the plot, narration and structure, characters, themes, motifs and symbols. It also highlights key quotations from the novel, with suggested explanations.

Literary essay

To ensure examination readiness and success, the resource also features an extensive section on the literary essay. This section provides guidelines on writing literary essays, two annotated examples from which to learn, and a selection of essay topics. It also includes suggested further reading, a useful revision reading quiz and suggestions on how to prepare for the final examination.

We hope you enjoy using this resource as much as we enjoyed putting it together. If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact us.

KEY TO USING THE BOXES IN THIS RESOURCE:



Definition or Glossary

Provides the meanings of words and terms used in the text



Information

Provides additional details or facts about a topic



Alert

Something to which you need to pay attention



Quirky Fact

Fun, interesting, extraneous information



Checklist

A list of items or activities required to complete a task satisfactorily

Background to the novel

Author background

In **Absolution**, author Patrick Flanery has created a haunting, thought-provoking and insightful novel that explores the notions of truth, memory, forgiveness, fear and identity in contemporary South Africa. In this section, Flanery shares with us the events and characters that have helped to shape his world and inspired him to write the novel. It consists of two interviews, the first focused on him as an author and the second on his novel, **Absolution**.

Flanery: 'Read twice as much as you think you should'



English Experience: Where did you go to school and what was it like?

Patrick Flanery: Growing up, I went to public schools in Omaha, Nebraska. After attending my neighborhood primary school for the first couple of years, I was enrolled in what are known in the U.S. as 'magnet schools': these have tended to be schools in majority black neighborhoods that have been forcibly desegregated by bussing in white students from the suburbs.

In the years I was attending these schools they had the best teachers in the city, the greatest resources, and lots of perks that ordinary schools didn't (this was a way of attracting white families, of course). It meant that I grew up, from the age of nine, with classmates and friends who were black, and that experience had a profound effect on my sense of race, of the pervasiveness of racism, and how my own whiteness was something I had never thought about critically.

Learning about South Africa was an important part of the curriculum from the time of Mandela's release from prison and we continued to study South Africa throughout my high school years.

EE: Where and what did you study after school?

PF: My undergraduate degree was in Film and Television Production at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. In the last couple years of my degree I was interning for Columbia-TriStar Pictures in their New York Literary Office, which looked for books and plays to adapt to film.

After graduating from NYU, I went on to work for Columbia-TriStar as a freelance 'reader', writing reports on material they were considering, and then I worked for a couple of years as a book scout for a talent management and film production company before deciding I wanted to go back to graduate school.

I moved to Britain and did a Masters and then a Doctorate in English Literature at Oxford, writing a thesis on the publishing history of the British author Evelyn Waugh. During that time I started doing research on J.M. Coetzee and on South African film and it was through those interests that *Absolution* began to be born.

I was in the midst of my doctoral work when I started writing *Absolution* and then, once I had finished my doctorate, I taught English Literature part-time at the University of Sheffield. From September 2014 I will be a Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Reading in the UK.

EE: Have you always written or wanted to write?

PF: In high school, I worked for three years on the school newspaper and, in my final year, I was appointed Editor-in-Chief. My father was a journalist, so writing was in the family, but the attractions of newspaper reporting itself were never very great. I thought for a while that I would work in the film industry, but when the kinds of opportunities I had imagined might be possible failed to materialise, I decided I would turn to writing fiction, knowing it might be a very long road to getting published.

EE: Was becoming an author a deliberate decision?

PF: Yes, or at least I made a deliberate decision to try to write seriously, almost immediately after finishing my undergraduate degree, when it became apparent that I was not going to become a movie director, as I had hoped. Writing novels offered a different though no less difficult way of telling stories and creating worlds, but one which did not require huge amounts of money. While I could have done an MFA in Creative Writing, I felt as though I wanted a different kind of training, which is why I instead did a doctorate in English Literature.

EE: What other works have you written?

PF: My second novel, *Fallen Land*, was published in 2013 and is about contemporary America. Although the setting is very different from *Absolution*, the books share certain themes, namely, a concern with the legacies of historical trauma, race relations, technological surveillance, dispossession, and the vulnerability of the home.

EE: Do you follow a similar process when writing each novel?

PF: Each book seems to dictate its own approach. *Absolution* grew up very organically and took a number of years to finish. I had no clear plan to begin with, so had to experiment and find my way through the text. With *Fallen Land* I worked from a loose outline, though ultimately I made a number of changes to the original plan. It helps to have an idea where the book might be going from the beginning, but it's also important to know that you have the agency to change your mind and see better solutions to problems than might first have presented themselves.

EE: Which novels or writers have had the biggest influence on you as a person and a writer?

PF: When I was in high school I responded very strongly to the novels of E.M. Forster, as well as to J.G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun*.

As an undergraduate at NYU I read nearly all of Virginia Woolf, for pleasure rather than for any particular course, and James Joyce was as important (I think many young white male writers in particular find rather too much of themselves in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, but it's still a great book).

In my twenties and thirties I discovered South African writing, and Coetzee, Gordimer, Marlene van Niekerk, and Zoë Wicomb were, and continue to be, very important. Henry James, Marcel Proust, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, any number of truly great writers have endless lessons to teach writers about writing and each of us about the strange phenomenon of being human.

"Generally, I am suspicious of sentiment, particularly in fiction, because I think it often betrays an attempt by the author to hide the truth ... for most people life is not sweet and easy; it is not cosy and secure, and fiction that paints the world as a safe place without serious systemic, institutional, and interpersonal problems is, for me, deeply dishonest."

EE: What are you reading at the moment?

PF: I've been reading the *Your Face Tomorrow* trilogy by the Spanish novelist Javier Marías. These are dense, absorbing books that owe as much to Proust as to detective and spy novels, and are narrated by a Spanish academic and expatriate who ends up working for British intelligence. I haven't read anything else quite like them. I've also been reading Nadine Gordimer's thought-provoking final novel, *No Time Like the Present*, which was published in the same year as *Absolution*. And when I tire of the present, I turn back to Henry James, to *The Wings of the Dove*.

EE: What do you consider to be the most important elements of good writing?

PF: It's so hard to say, because tastes change over time, and sometimes those tastes are specific to a given culture or nation, so what qualifies as a celebrated American novel today might not necessarily look anything like a celebrated Spanish or French or Japanese novel.

What great writing has in common though, across such variations, and across time and taste and culture, is the ability to arrest the reader, to catch one's attention, to describe the world in a way that feels new, and to do so in ways that are attentive to the nuances of style and language and form.

'Rules for writing' are often invented by people who want to police quite narrow definitions of what is 'good' or 'bad', and while there is certainly a great deal of objectively bad writing, 'good' writing is so varied in its approach to the problem of telling a story that it is difficult to say one method is always better than another.

EE: As an author, how do you generate your ideas?

PF: My own ideas spring from everyday life, from world events, from something I might discover in the course of doing research for another project, from the history of my family and ancestors, from the inequalities of contemporary society, from politics and headlines and conversations and stories that people tell me, from memories of people I know or once knew, from dreams and daydreams and, of course, from the books I read.

EE: What advice would you give aspiring young writers?

PF: Read twice as much as you think you should. Do not be afraid of losing your own voice. If you're meant to be a writer (and not everyone is), your own voice will find its way. If you don't know about the literature that already exists in the world, you don't stand a very good chance of producing a book that other people will want to read.

EE: What do you like to do to unwind and relax?

PF: Walking and running in the park near where I live, cooking every day, watching films and, of course, reading.

EE: What took you to the UK and where do you consider 'home'?

PF: I came to the UK to go to graduate school and met my South African partner here (we were both at Oxford studying literature). I don't know where 'home' is. I talk about going home to the flat where we live in London, and I talk about going home to New York, and when I'm in California, where I was born, I feel a deep sense of home that is more about the smell of the place and the quality of light and the plants and trees than anything else. Home is an idea and a set of circumstances and relationships more than it is a place, a structure, a city, or a country.

***Absolution*: Making sense of our present through their past**

English Experience: What prompted you to write the novel?

Patrick Flanery: I was researching censorship for my doctoral thesis and began to think about the ways that writers who are subjected to different forms of censorship might find of surviving — or accommodating themselves to — a system that was designed to thwart free expression.

EE: How long did it take you to write?

PF: I began writing what would become the book in 2005. I worked on it for a couple of years, off and on, before putting it aside. I returned to the manuscript again in 2009, finished writing the novel over the course of several months in 2010, and spent the first half of 2011 editing it.

EE: What are the main themes you set out to address in the work?

PF: Apart from freedom of expression and censorship, I was conscious of wanting to write a book about memory, about the ways in which people with shared experiences remember things differently. I also wanted to write about the different forms of terror: political; criminal; the terror of surveillance; inter-personal fear; the dread that comes from finding oneself powerless; also the terror of realising one's power over other people. Terror is a profoundly complex and multifaceted phenomenon. It is not just an emotion, but a quality and, sadly, perhaps the presiding spirit of our times.

EE: Why did you choose this subject matter for your first novel?

PF: Although I have not said this elsewhere, this is a novel that, in a great many ways, was born out of the sense of trauma and terror I felt after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. I had been working in New York City until mid 2001 and the attacks produced, in me, a feeling of total disempowerment and vulnerability.

I knew that I needed to write a book that would help me understand this experience and which would also begin to make sense of the ways in which individuals might be complicit, either naively or by design, in acts of atrocity committed against others.

EE: How did you decide on the title of the novel?

PF: The title was late in coming. I started off thinking it would be called *Complicit*, but it had a number of working titles, including *The Cast Out*, *Dissidence* (with its play on 'dissidents') and *The Invaders* (which the publishers thought sounded too much like science fiction). Eventually, my editors and I settled on *Absolution* and, as soon as we thought of it, it felt right, like the most appropriate title the novel could possibly have had. 'Absolution' becomes, then, both a governing theme and the goal towards which the characters are moving.

EE: Why did you opt to use a complex, multi-layered narrative to tell the story?

PF: I felt as though this was the best way of animating the tensions between the competing versions of the past held by the characters. It also works as a way of reflecting the fact that 'the truth', particularly in the context of the late stages of Apartheid, was itself complex and multi-layered (indeed, that the truth is always so).

In part, I was also trying to write into the novel some of what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) sought to do: that is, to allow for multiple *kinds* of truth. The TRC imagined four varieties of truth: forensic (the *objective*, scientific version of events); narrative (the individual's *subjective* version of events); dialogic or discursive (which I understand to be the 'truth' that emerges from the interplay between the forensic and narrative forms of truth); and, finally, restorative truth (the version of events that is necessary for resolution; perhaps one might think of this as a kind of 'therapeutic' narrative).

EE: Why did you decide to set the novel in contemporary South Africa?

PF: When I was still in the very early stages of writing the book (a book that, in some ways, I did not know was going to be a novel), I began to see that I was dealing with a range of themes and issues (censorship, liberation struggle, terrorism, torture, memory, forgiveness, complicity in past crimes) that might have been pertinent to any number of national or regional situations, but, as I started thinking about government-sponsored censorship and could not find a way of writing the book without this being a part of it, this limited my options for a setting.

For a while, I thought about setting it in a kind of 'nowhere' country, an allegorical place, or even in a near-future America, but I soon began to realise that the landscape I was describing in the early drafts was already the South African one I had come to know intimately from 2003 onwards. South Africa had also experienced institutionalised censorship under Apartheid, and the other themes I was trying to explore seemed to fit most naturally in to a South African setting. Once I decided that I was writing a South African story, all the pieces began to fall into place.

EE: What research did you undertake when writing the novel?

PF: I first visited South Africa in 2003 and made many subsequent trips with my South African partner while I was writing the book. Each time I stayed with my in-laws in George, visited friends in Cape Town and Grahamstown, and spent a great deal of time driving through the Eastern and Western Cape Provinces. I visited Johannesburg for the first time in 2010 and much of what I write about Johannesburg in the novel is informed by my experiences then.

I also undertook substantial historical research, reading histories of South Africa, the TRC and the African National Congress (ANC). I also read countless pages of TRC transcripts from the Human Rights Violations hearings. South African novels were also important because I wanted my own book to be in conversation with what I regard as some of the best South African fiction. Books by J.M. Coetzee, Marlene van Niekerk, Zoë Wicomb, Ivan Vladislavic, K. Sello Duiker and Nadine Gordimer were particularly important.

EE: One reviewer describes the way South Africa is portrayed in the novel as 'brutally unsentimental' – do you agree with this assessment?

PF: If 'unsentimental' means 'looking as objectively as possible at the reality of a given place' (while still being conscious that absolute objectivity is perhaps impossible), then I suppose that this assessment might be considered to be accurate. My second novel, *Fallen Land*, is about contemporary America, and I hope it would also be regarded as 'brutally unsentimental'.

Generally, I am suspicious of sentiment, particularly in fiction, because I think it often betrays an attempt by the author to hide the truth — however that might be construed — or to accept a single 'version' of it. For most people life is not sweet and easy; it is not cosy and secure, and fiction that paints the world as a safe place without serious systemic, institutional, and interpersonal problems is, for me, deeply dishonest.

EE: Do you believe that South Africans are still burdened by the past and, if so, in what ways?

PF: As an ‘outsider’, even one with strong family and intellectual ties to the country, I am cautious about answering this question. In a way, I think all countries, all nations, are burdened by their particular pasts. America is burdened by its history of slavery and racism; Britain is burdened by its history of empire and its ongoing class system; Germany is burdened by the Holocaust; France by its partial complicity in the Holocaust and by the aftermath of its own empire (especially its violent handling of the independence movement in Algeria); Spain by the dictatorship of Franco; Ireland by its ongoing division... one could go on and on.

The past, and its legacy, is inescapable. The question is: how does a nation, how do people, deal with the weight of history? How do they redress past wrongs? These are some of the questions that most interest me as a novelist: how we *live through* the burden of history, and how history inflects (and sometimes infects) everything we do in our given present.

EE: How do you imagine South African students will respond to *Absolution*?

PF: I hope they will see aspects of their world depicted in ways that are recognisable, but I hope, too, that they will find their world slightly de-familiarised, which is to say that I hope *Absolution* might also help them to see their own lives in subtly different ways.

I suspect, and hope, that their experiences of growing up in democratic South Africa — of being part of the ‘born-free’ generation — will be distinct in important ways from the kind of life that Sam had growing up under Apartheid. This is not just a novel about the past, though; it is also very much a novel about South Africa in the present. It is a novel about the human condition more generally as well, of course. It is about the present in which we find ourselves: under surveillance, locked in our homes, fearing the unknown, and suspecting those who are unlike us.

EE: What advice would you give students to help them understand the work?

PF: Assume nothing. Read attentively, but also read sceptically, which is to say, do not assume that the truth is ever being spoken by a character. Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn’t.

EE: Could you describe the inspiration behind the complex character of Clare Wald?

PF: Clare is not based on any one person; my writing does not work in that way. Usually, a character draws traits from various people I have known or encountered. Sometimes that process of amalgamation is conscious, sometimes it functions at a much deeper level.

I had various writers in mind as possible models for Clare and, in particular, the British novelist, Muriel Spark, who had a difficult relationship with her son, a contentious one with her biographer, and a close relationship with her female assistant.

In terms of personality, though, Clare is a blend of my maternal grandmother and several teachers I had over the years (it is not coincidental that Clare has been a teacher in the past, and that her relationship with Sam is as much one of mentorship as anything else).

Clare’s psychology, the way she *thinks*, is, more often than not, my own. In this respect, she is the more autobiographical of the two main characters, even though Clare and I share little to nothing in the way of common life events or experiences.

EE: There are several strong female characters in *Absolution*. Was this important to you?

PF: Yes, on two levels. Firstly, as a male writer, creating strong and believable female characters is a challenge I take seriously. I am not, and will never be, a writer only or even chiefly interested in men. Secondly, for the purposes of this book in particular, it was important to me that all the ways in which women have lived and worked and loved in South Africa be depicted, especially given that it is a strongly masculinised society and one which, historically, has sought to limit the roles of women to the domestic. I don't claim to have achieved this, but I hope I have shown that women may be wives, sisters, mothers and daughters, yet within, and alongside, these roles, they may also be fighters (of various kinds), professionals, and so forth, in the same way that men are. I am a feminist; I wish more men were. I hope that my work reflects this.

EE: The novel contains harrowing scenes depicting torture methods employed by the state. To what extent are these portrayals factually based?

PF: It is important to be aware of the fact that the primary torture scene, near the end of the first section, is Clare's nightmare vision of what *might* have happened to her daughter. It is, in fact, entirely imagined, and Clare knows it is imagined. That is not to say that torture of extremely brutal (and brutally creative) character did not take place under Apartheid, but that this particular one is a work of the imagination. Clare tries to imagine the *worst* possible end for her daughter and the idea of Laura caged on a beach is what her mind conjures. She knows it is a nightmare, but she also knows that the full history of Apartheid atrocities has not necessarily been brought to light.

EE: What reactions to the novel from readers have surprised you the most?

PF: Among the most moving — and most disturbing — were the experiences of an elderly couple in Camps Bay, whom I've come to know since publishing the book. Their daughter was involved in the liberation struggle and for years they were unaware that she was living only minutes away from them, just as Clare is unaware in the novel that Laura is living so close to her. This same couple had also suffered a break-in, as Clare does, that left them feeling profoundly shaken (they were held hostage for some time), even though they came out of it physically unharmed. In these two respects, in particular, they felt that *Absolution* resonated with their experiences of living through the long years of Apartheid, the transition, and experiencing some of the more distressing realities of life in the country today.

EE: What aspects of South African culture have had the strongest impact on you?

PF: I wouldn't know where to begin. The literature of the country has, obviously, been of huge importance for me, but so have countless other aspects of the culture that stem from everyday life: language; food; music; a way of being in the world. As I write this, though, I am conscious of the ways in which there is not a single South African culture, but many overlapping and sometimes contiguous cultures that have some shared aspects.

I feel at home here in a way that is analogous to my feeling in America. I certainly feel more at home in South Africa than I do in Britain. South African culture (or cultures) makes sense and is familiar to me at a very visceral level. In terms of places, the Western Cape feels most familiar, most like home. I think this has something to do with the ways in which Afrikaans culture is like the 'frontier cultures' of my childhood in the American Midwest and the landscape often reminds me of California, where both sets of my grandparents settled. At the same time, every time I come back to the country, I learn something or notice something new about it.

EE: Finally, are there any particular works or authors you would recommend to students who are keen to explore the issues you raise in *Absolution* further?

PF: This is an incomplete list, but the following are books that I think of as important inter-texts for *Absolution*: Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story*; J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and *In the Heart of the Country*; Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun*; K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents*; Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*; and, because every South African should read it, Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*, which is, arguably, the greatest and most important post-Apartheid novel yet written.

Enrichment tasks

Exercise 1: Visual Literacy

Consider the following cartoon by Zapiro, published in *The Times* on 4 February 2010, and answer the questions that follow:



i 'Zapiro' is the pen name of Jonathan Shapiro, a South African cartoonist best known for his politically satirical cartoons that regularly appear in various national newspapers.

BACKGROUND
TO THE NOVEL

1.1 Identify the anniversary that Shapiro is marking with this particular cartoon, and explain how you are able to do so. (3)

1.2 Define the term 'caricature', and explain how Zapiro makes use of this device in his cartoon. (3)

1.3 What does Zapiro's cartoon suggest about South African politics in 2010, and how is this suggestion conveyed?

(4)

Consider the following cartoon, also by Zapiro and published in *The Times* on 6 April 2010 following the murder of *Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging* (AWB) stalwart Eugene Terre'blanche, and answer the questions that follow:



1.4 Provide a brief explanation for the meaning and history behind the phrase ‘Kill the Boer’. (2)

1.5 Provide a definition for the term ‘metaphor’, and explain the meaning of the speech bubble, which reads: ‘The ANC insists “Kill the Boer” is a metaphor...’. (3)

1.6 Explain the meaning of the term ‘metonymy’, and indicate why it would be more accurate to describe the figurative interpretation of ‘Kill the Boer’ implied in the cartoon as metonymy, rather than as a metaphor. (3)

ABSOLUTION

1.7 Explain what is implied by the attacker's comment in the speech bubble, 'What's a metaphor?' (2)

1.8 By referring to both of the Zapiro cartoons provided, identify some of the social and political issues that the artist interrogates, and discuss how he uses black humour and political satire to convey his message. (5)

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Exercise 2: Protest Poetry

Consider the poem “Alexandra” by Mongane Wally Serote and answer the questions that follow:

“Alexandra”

Were it possible to say,	1
Mother, I have seen more beautiful mothers,	
A most loving mother,	
And tell her there I will go,	
Alexandra, I would have long gone from you.	5
But we have only one mother, none can replace,	
Just as we have no choice to be born,	
We can't choose mothers;	
We fall out of them like we fall out of life to death.	
And, Alexandra,	10
My beginning was knotted to you,	
Just like you knot my destiny.	
You throb in my inside silences	
You are silent in my heart-beat that's loud to me.	
Alexandra often I've cried.	15
When I was thirsty my tongue tasted dust,	
Dust burdening your nipples.	
I cry Alexandra when I am thirsty.	
Your breasts ooze the dirty waters of your dongas,	
Waters diluted with the blood of my brothers, your children,	20
Who once chose dongas for death-beds.	
Do you love me Alexandra, or what are you doing to me?	
You frighten me, Mama,	
You wear expressions like you would be nasty to me,	
You frighten me, Mama,	25
When I lie on your breast to rest, something tells me	
You are bloody cruel.	
Alexandra, hell	
What have you done to me?	
I have seen people but I feel like I'm not one,	30
Alexandra what are you doing to me?	
I feel I have sunk to such meekness!	
I lie flat while others walk on me to far places.	
I have gone from you, many times,	
I come back.	35
Alexandra, I love you;	
I know	
When all these worlds became funny to me	
I silently waded back to you	
And amid the rubble I lay,	40
Simple and black.	



As the name suggests, **protest poetry** is a form of poetry that draws attention to inequality and social ills. It is often directed at the corruption and moral injustices perpetrated by the government of a country. In South Africa, protest poetry became a common means of criticising the policies of the apartheid government during the 1970s and 1980s, although because of strict censorship laws, poets often had to make their points quite subtly.



GLOSSARY

dongas (line 19): ditches formed by the eroding action of rain water



Alexandra is a township located in Johannesburg. During apartheid, it was the site of several violent protests and clashes between residents and police. Mongane Wally Serote grew up in Alexandra during the 1950s and 1960s.

2.1 Define the poetic term ‘personification’, and provide a detailed explanation of how, and to what purpose, Serote has used personification in “Alexandra”. (5)

2.2 Describe the speaker’s tone in the poem, and provide evidence from the text to support your answer. (3)

2.3 In your own words, explain the speaker's figurative meaning in lines 1-5 of the poem. (2)

2.4 Identify the punctuation mark at the end of line 8 and explain its function in context. (2)

2.5 What contradictory statement is the speaker making in lines 11-12 when he says: 'My beginning was knotted to you, / Just like you knot my destiny.'? (3)

ABSOLUTION

2.6 Identify and explain the Figure of Speech in lines 16-17. (3)

2.7 Explain the double meaning present in the lines 'You are bloody cruel' (line 27) and 'Alexandra, hell' (line 28). (4)

2.8 Comment on the speaker's meaning when he says, 'I have seen people but I feel like I'm not one' (line 30), relating this statement back to the significance of the social-political context of the poem. (3)

2.9 Provide a synonym for the word ‘meekness’ (line 32). (1)

2.10 Explain how the poem “Alexandra” can be understood as a protest poem that offers an indictment of the apartheid regime. Your answer should also indicate why Serote was not more outspoken in his criticisms of apartheid. (5)

2.11 Consider the following poem, also by Serote, entitled “City Johannesburg”, and compare the poet’s use of personification in this poem with “Alexandra”. Your response should identify the poet’s intention in using this Figure of Speech in each poem. (4)

“City Johannesburg”

This way I salute you:

My hand pulses to my back trousers pocket

Or into my inner jacket pocket

For my pass, my life,

Jo’burg City.

My hand like a starved snake rears my pockets

For my thin, ever lean wallet,

While my stomach growls a friendly smile to hunger,

Jo’burg City.

My stomach also devours coppers and papers

Don’t you know?

Jo’burg City, I salute you;

When I run out, or roar in a bus to you,

I leave behind me, my love,

My comic houses and people, my dongas and my ever whirling dust,

My death

That’s so related to me as a wink to the eye.

Jo’burg City

I travel on your black and white and roboted roads

Through your thick iron breath that you inhale

At six in the morning and exhale from five noon.

Jo’burg City

That is the time when I come to you,

When your neon flowers flaunt from your electrical wind,

That is the time when I leave you,

When your neon flowers flaunt their way through the falling darkness

On your cement trees.

And as I go back, to my love,

My dongas, my dust, my people, my death,

Where death lurks in the dark like a blade in the flesh,

I can feel your roots, anchoring your might, my feebleness

In my flesh, in my mind, in my blood,

And everything about you says it,

That, that is all you need of me.

Jo’burg City, Johannesburg,

Listen when I tell you,

There is no fun, nothing, in it,

When you leave the women and men with such frozen expressions,

Expressions that have tears like furrows of soil erosion,

Jo’burg City, you are dry like death,

Jo’burg City, Johannesburg, Jo’burg City.

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BACKGROUND
TO THE NOVEL

[35]

Critical commentary

Preparation

Reading novels for academic analysis

When reading a novel that you are required to analyse for academic purposes, it is best to approach the text in a slightly different way than you would if reading a novel for pleasure. Here are a few tips to keep in mind when reading novels for academic analysis.

- It may sound obvious, but **make sure you are paying attention** when you read. Often when we are reading, our attention wanders and we don't really take in what it is that we're reading. Be sure that when you're reading a novel for academic purposes, your attention stays focused at all times and that you are not distracted by your phone, television, friends or family members.
- **Make notes** in the page margins as you read. Marking important passages as you read them will help you save time when you are looking for them again later and will also help to keep you focused as you read.
- **Underline unfamiliar words** so that you can look up their definitions and make a note of their meanings.
- Keep the **themes** of the novel in mind as you are reading and keep asking yourself how these themes are being conveyed and developed in the narrative. Make notes of any recurring **motifs and symbols** and what these represent in the text.
- Remember that you are reading for **meaning** (*what* is being said) and for **form** (*how* it is being conveyed). Literary analysis is about detecting patterns in the text and determining how these patterns convey particular messages.

Patterns of meaning

What is the text saying? (i.e. Themes)

- How is the plot structured? What happens in the narrative, and in what order?
- Where and when does the story take place?
- Who is the subject of the story?
- What are the recurring themes in the narrative?
- What message is being conveyed?
- How do you feel about what is happening in the story?

Patterns of form

How is it being said? (i.e. Technique)

- Who is the narrator of the text? When or on what occasion(s) is this narration taking place?
- How does the point of view from which the story is being told affect our understanding?
- How are the characters developed throughout the text? How do they interact with one another, and why?
- Is the narration sequential or achronological? Are there flashbacks or flash-forwards? Why is the narration structured in this way?
- What kind of symbols and motifs recur in the text? What do these symbolise, and how do they reinforce the themes of the novel?
- What do the title and chapter headings tell us about this narrative and how we should interpret these?



GLOSSARY OF IMPORTANT LITERARY TERMS

archetype, archetypal: a very typical or common example of a particular type of person or thing.

***bildungsroman*:** a genre of literature in which the protagonist, usually an adolescent, undergoes spiritual, intellectual, moral, psychological and/or social growth throughout the course of the narrative and, in doing so, achieves maturity (also known as a 'coming of age' story).

catharsis: the often painful process through which a character heals, usually through the release of strong or repressed emotions.

connotation: an idea, association or feeling that is evoked by the use of a particular word, in addition to its literal meaning.

context: the 'things around the text'; the particular circumstances that form the setting for a narrative event, statement or idea.

denouement: the climax or finale of a narrative in which the various strands of the plot are drawn together or resolved.

diction: the choice of words used.

discourse: written or spoken communication or, in literary terms, the treatment of a particular subject within the narrative.

foil: a character who contrasts starkly with another character, usually the protagonist, in order to emphasise the particular qualities or traits of the other character.

form: the structure or design of a particular literary work.

genre: in literary terms, a genre is a particular and distinguishable category of writing that employs distinct, common conventions that are recognisable across all works of the same category.

ideology: a system of beliefs or ideals which often forms the basis for a political or economic policy; for example, apartheid.

irony: a perceptible inconsistency (sometimes humorous) in an apparently straightforward statement or situation which, given its particular context, takes on the opposite meaning or significance. In the case of **dramatic irony**, the reader or audience may know more about the character's situation or circumstances than the character and is able to recognise a sharply different or contrasting meaning to the character's statements.

metaphor, metaphoric: a Figure of Speech in which one thing is taken to represent or symbolise something else, in order to transfer particular associations or qualities on to the thing or idea being represented.

paradox, paradoxical: a statement that is so obviously untrue or contradictory that it leads the reader to consider alternative contexts in which it may be considered accurate; or a situation, person or thing that combines contradictory features or qualities.

point of view: the position or vantage point from which the events of a story are presented to the reader.

protagonist: the main/central character in the narrative.

syntax: the particular arrangement of words or phrases to create sentences, which may carry particular emphasis or connotations.

theme: the central message, idea or insight of a literary work.

Summaries and analyses

Using this section

Working through the novel chapter by chapter ensures that a solid foundation of knowledge is laid, and then gradually and effectively expanded. Students are not required to deal with the entire novel until they have worked through it in a methodical, step-by-step manner.

Each chapter and sub-section is summarised and analysed separately. Extensive glossaries are included and learners are required to engage with the content directly through chapter-specific questions. At the end of the summaries, there is also a series of enrichment tasks and, at the end of the Literary Essay section, a wide selection of rigorous essay topics, ensuring that students tackle the novel in its entirety and are prepared for the final examination.

Section I

Establishing perspectives (pages 3 to 32)

Summary

“Sam” (p.3-14)

The novel opens with a chapter narrated in the **first person** by Sam Leroux, a young academic who has been commissioned by a publisher to write the biography of renowned South African author Clare Wald. He recounts his first, rather awkward meeting with the reticent writer at her home. She is aloof and cold towards him, seeming to go out of her way to make him uncomfortable and to voice her objections to his project.

Sam and Clare have met before, albeit briefly. Clare knows this, but mistakenly suggests that their meeting took place at an awards ceremony in London some years before. Sam does not correct her, though he clearly recalls that their encounter took place after a conference in Amsterdam, at which he spoke about Clare’s work. He remembers that Clare was quite drunk at the time and decides that this is probably why she does not remember meeting him.

Although Clare is not enthusiastic about the biography project, she admits that she has read Sam’s work and declares that he is not an ‘imbecile’ (p.4). She claims that she would write her own autobiography if she did not believe that it would be a ‘waste of time’ (p.4). She cannot understand why anyone would be interested in her personal life.



First person narration

describes a story that is narrated by one character, using the personal pronoun ‘I’, and which recounts the individual experiences of that character from his or her own perspective.

Third person narratives are told by a detached narrator who is not directly involved in the action of the story. The narrator may focus the narrative on the perspective of one character, or may provide the reader with insight into the thoughts and emotions of several characters.

Clare warns Sam that she will not give him access to any of her personal letters or journals, and he assures her that he intends to start the process of writing her biography by conducting a series of interviews. She snidely warns him not to cherish any hopes of them becoming friends. She is very busy, she says, as her new book, entitled *Absolution*, is due to be released later that year.

Upon his arrival at Clare's house, Sam is met at the front door by Marie, Clare's 'beetle-eyed assistant' (p.5). Sam contemplates Clare's appearance and her reception of him in her home. She is 'almost a very old woman' (p.6), with thin silver hair and a spreading waistline. He detects a 'plastic tension' (p.6) in her jaw and feels 'a flash of anger at her vanity' (p.6). When he enters her home, he notes the extravagant security features, and the fact that she chooses to meet him in the coldest, least welcoming room in the house. Clare abruptly tells him that she does not intend to feed him during their interview sessions, and that he must bring his own food and drink.

Sam commences this, their first interview, at the 'predictable' (p.6) point, by asking about Clare's childhood. He notes that 'almost nothing is known about her life beyond the slim facts of public record' (p.6). She tells him that her father was a lawyer and her mother an academic, but that she saw little of them as a child, instead being raised by a series of nannies. When Sam asks whether her parents informed her political stance, she sighs and tells him that she is 'not political' and describes her parents as 'reluctant liberals' (p.7). Despite this, Sam pursues his line of questioning, asking her if it is difficult 'to engage in a critique of the government, as a writer' (p.7).

Clare evades Sam's queries, wrong-footing him and making it difficult for him to ask the questions he has prepared. He realises that these interviews with the author are not going to go as smoothly as he thought. He changes tactic and asks her about her sister, as 'there's no denying the importance of politics there' (p.8). Clare refuses to talk about her sibling beyond what is publicly known: that her sister suffered a 'violent death' that 'crippled' (p.8) her family and that the man convicted of her murder died in police custody.

The next day, Clare cancels what is supposed to be her second meeting with Sam. Instead, he decides to visit the Western Cape Archives. As he parks his car, he shares an exchange with the car guard, who gives him a 'subservient smile' (p.9). The car guard's demeanour unnerves him, and he is self-conscious, aware that although he was born and raised in South Africa, he has spent so many years abroad that he is something of a 'foreigner' (p.9) in the land of his birth. He recalls the previous day, when a local woman at a market spoke to him in Afrikaans and he was unable to respond, having 'lost' (p.9) too much of the language.

Sam is shown into the reading room of the Archives building, where the administrator brings him the files he requests. The other people in the room are researching their family histories, and Sam feels them staring at him as he pores through previously classified files, all of which bear a red stamp declaring them as 'confidential' (p.10). Sam works through the files, photographing the pages within them. During his lunch break, when one of the other researchers asks him what he is working on, he tells her that he is 'looking at the files of the Publications Control Board. The censors' (p.10).

That afternoon, when Sam leaves the Archives building, he tips the car guard what he thinks is 'proper', but notes that whatever the amount, 'It always seems like too little or too much' (p.10). Later, when he returns to his friend Greg's house, where he is staying, he asks his opinion on what the right amount may be. Greg is an old friend, a fellow student that Sam met during his studies in New York, and Sam describes him as 'the most morally and socially engaged friend [he] still [has] in [this] country' (p.10).

Greg tells Sam that no amount is too much because the car guards 'need it more' (p.10). Sam says he does not want it to seem like charity, but Greg counters that there is nothing wrong with charity. He also tells Sam that, as a 'tourist', he 'owe[s] them a little more' (p.11). Sam says he does not consider himself a tourist, but Greg disagrees because Sam '[hasn't] been local for a long time' (p.11). Greg claims that, as a local, he gives less than he would expect Sam to give, 'because

[he gives] every day and [has] been giving for years' (p.11). Greg then suggests they go to the Waterfront to shop and see a movie and that the nanny, Nonyameko, look after Greg's infant son, Dylan, while they are out (p.11).

The following day, Sam returns to Clare's house for their next interview. This time he is buzzed in, met at the front door and shown to the same room as before by Clare herself. He asks again about Clare's sister, Nora, to which Clare responds wearily. She concedes that, like herself, her sister was 'apolitical' or, perhaps more accurately, 'privately political' (p.12). She acknowledges, however, that her sister chose a 'public life by marrying a public figure' (p.12) and that, as a public figure in South Africa during apartheid, it was impossible to be apolitical. Clare says that her sister was naïve and should have known that she was 'marking herself for death' (p.12).

Sam guides the conversation to Clare's education abroad, and notes that she returned to South Africa 'at a time when many in the anti-apartheid movement — writers especially — were beginning to go into exile' (p.13). Clare confirms this, saying that she returned before she had been published because she wanted 'to be a part of the opposition, such as it was' (p.13), though she did not resent those who chose or were forced to emigrate.

As the chapter closes, Sam recalls their meeting in Amsterdam, when Clare, 'drunk on the adulation, and on quantities of champagne' (p.13), celebrated with her group of new friends, of which Sam was a part. He is not surprised that she does not remember him, given how drunk she was. He finds it difficult to believe, nonetheless, that the writer for whom he has so much respect and the taciturn old woman in front of him are the same person.



GLOSSARY

intoxication (p.3): drunkenness

duress (p.3): pressure, threat, coercion

imbecile (p.4): idiot

imperial (p.5): relating to an empire (in this case, the British empire)

periphery (p.5): outermost, boundary

squall (p.6): flurry, puff

absolutist (p.7): a person who holds unconditional political or philosophical values

ellipse (p.7): a regular oval shape

continuum (p.7): a continuous series

vivisection (p.8): the practice of performing operations on live animals

subservient (p.9): submissive, obedient

apolitical (p.12): not interested or involved in politics

parry (p.12): to ward off an attack

unconscionable (p.12): not right or reasonable

adulation (p.13): excessive admiration or praise

effusive (p.13): showing gratitude and pleasure

magnum (p.13): a wine bottle that is double the standard size

“Absolution” (p.15-22)

The second chapter of the novel is the first extract of Clare’s forthcoming book, *Absolution*. Despite Clare’s protestations that she has no interest in writing an autobiography (p.4), *Absolution* is clearly a form of memoir, even though it is written in the third person rather than the first person.

The events of this chapter take place some time before the previous chapter. Clare describes an incident when she wakes suddenly one night, instinctively knowing that something is wrong. She knows that the noise that has woken her could not have been made by Marie, her assistant, who is sleeping in the room above her own. She wishes that she had installed an alarm or panic button in the house, as her son and friends encouraged her to do, but she has resisted increasing her security for years.

Clare lies quietly in bed and tries to convince herself that nothing is wrong. She is not worried about the valuables in her home, but she is afraid of being confronted by ‘men with guns’ (p.15). Just when she has started to calm down, she hears a door opening downstairs. She does not own a mobile phone and so she grabs the landline phone in the dark, but when she holds the receiver to her ear, she discovers that the line has been cut.

A sharp smell assaults her nostrils, ‘astringent, chemical, not a smell of her home’ (p.16). She hears a footfall on the stairs and finds that she is paralysed with fear, unable even to speak. There is nowhere to hide in her room and she has lost the key to the lock of her bedroom door. She hauls the granite boulder she uses as a doorstep into the bed with her, wondering vaguely what she would do with it if confronted by the intruders.

In the glass of the framed photograph on the wall opposite her bed, she sees the reflection of four hooded men, ‘carrying stunted guns in their gloved hands’ (p.16) as they file down the corridor. The last of the four men looks into the room and sniffs the air. Clare shuts her eyes tightly, feigning sleep and, in her imagination, she conjures the weight of the man on top of her as he attacks. The man, however, withdraws from the room and follows the others down the corridor.

Suddenly, as Clare lies terrified in her bed, there is a series of ‘bright, explosive shots’ (p.17) that ring deafeningly through the house. She hears a rush of feet running past her door and one of the shots shatters the glass of the framed photo on her wall.

Clare finds Marie standing beside her bed and she tells Clare that she has chased the intruders away with her gun. Clare tells Marie that she did not know she kept a gun. Marie says she felt she had to get one, since Clare refused to get an alarm installed. Marie assures Clare that the intruders have driven away, before going to the neighbours’ house to call the police.

As Marie leaves, Clare finds herself angry with the other woman, despite the fact that she has just chased off the intruders: ‘How dare Marie keep a gun without telling her? How dare she fire shots in Clare’s house? How dare she assume so much?’ (p.18). Clare realises that it has been many years since she has been so close to firing guns — not since an attack on her cousin Dorothy’s farm in the Eastern Cape, some time ago.

When the police arrive, they find no sign of forced entry, though Marie insists that she locked up the house the evening before. Marie is unlikely to have forgotten, as she has ‘a mania about security’ (p.19). Clare stands in her kitchen and listens to the police questioning Marie, but no-one asks Clare to make a statement.

Clare tells the investigating officer that only one thing has been taken from the house: a tin box containing the barrister’s wig that her father would wear in court in London. It is not particularly valuable and seems an odd item for the intruders to have stolen.

Despite her protestations, Clare is not asked for a statement and is sent back to bed. There are evidence markers and streaks of blood throughout the house. The ‘synthetic, chemical’ smell that reminds her of ‘orange disinfectant’ (p.21) still permeates the air. She realises that the men must

ABSOLUTION

have been professional criminals, as they knew to clean themselves before entering the house to prevent leaving any evidence.

The following morning, Clare retrieves the photograph from the shattered frame in the bedroom and discovers that it is not badly damaged. The black-and-white photograph depicts her sister Nora, looking stern and haughty in a conservative dress and hat at a political rally many decades ago.

Marie appears beside Clare and tells her that they will have to move because the security of the house is simply inadequate. Clare protests, saying that she will install an alarm and better burglar bars, but Marie insists: 'You need walls. You cannot stay in this country without walls to protect you. Walls and razor wire, electrified. Guard dogs, too' (p.22). Clare concedes and asks Marie to arrange appointments with estate agents.



GLOSSARY

bounty (p.15): reward, prize

mantra (p.15): a repeated word or phrase used to aid meditation

coir (p.15): fibre from the husk of a coconut

astringent (p.16): sharp or severe

pungent (p.17): sharp or strong (taste or smell)

barristers (p.20): advocates (court lawyers)

riven (p.21): split or cracked

imperious (p.22): arrogant, domineering

buttressed (p.22): supported or strengthened

“Clare” (p.23-28)

In this first extract of her private journal, Clare attempts to recreate the events leading up to her daughter Laura's disappearance, addressing Laura directly in the second person as 'you' (p.23). It is clear that Clare is unsure of precisely how the events played out. She imagines her daughter escaping in the middle of the night from some unnamed place, running across fields and scrabbling under fences to reach the road, and speculates about which route she may have taken in order to 'hide [her] tracks' (p.23). What is clear is that Laura is on the run, attempting to conceal who she is and where she has been.

Clare refers to the detonation of a bomb, for which Laura is 'responsible' (p.23). This is the first indication that Laura was involved in what may have been considered terrorist activities during the apartheid struggle. Again, however, Clare demonstrates her uncertainty about the exact nature of her daughter's activities.

Addressing Laura directly, Clare explains that she has tried and failed many times to make sense of her daughter's past and to reconstruct the last days before her disappearance. The diary that Clare now writes is the latest attempt to piece together these moments of her daughter's life, 'because there was never an official account' (p.24). She mentions that she is writing the diary during the same time period when Sam is interviewing her for the biography. She imagines that Laura may someday read this account.

Clare admits that there are days when she wonders whether she should have filed a case with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in an effort to find out what happened to Laura, but she feels that this would have achieved little. By recreating her own account of Laura's final days, Clare appears to be seeking some form of closure.

She imagines Laura reaching a crossroads, 'standing alone in the dark' (p.25) amidst others hoping to hitch a lift to their various destinations. Clare speculates that, as a white woman, Laura would

have looked out of place waiting at a crossroads in the middle of the night, rousing the suspicion of the others as ‘Women like [Laura] did not go on foot after dark, not in those days’ (p.25). She imagines that Laura would have disguised herself as a backpacker, and would have carried supplies of water and her favourite Safari Dates.

Clare speculates that there would have been some plan in place for Laura to be picked up in the middle of the night and taken to a place of safety where she could hide, perhaps in Botswana or Lesotho, but that something went wrong — perhaps her accomplice was arrested — and her lift never arrived. Realising this, Laura is forced to make another plan, hitching a ride with a truck that passes by.

As she approaches the truck, Laura sees that there is a small boy and a dog in the cab with the driver, who asks her where she is heading. She replies that she is going to Ladybrand, and the driver tells her that he can take her as far as Port Elizabeth. She gets into the truck, recoiling at the stench of urine and dog.

The driver introduces himself as Bernard, and the little boy as Sam. The name of the dog is Tiger. Bernard tells her that he stopped because he was concerned to see her standing alone on the side of the road. Clare speculates that Laura felt more comfortable getting into the truck with a strange man because she was reassured by the presence of the boy.



GLOSSARY

meagre (p.25): insufficient, inadequate

impecunious (p.26): having little or no money

detritus (p.26): waste, debris

bequeathed (p.27): property left to someone in a will, after a person’s death

“1989” (p.29-32)

As suggested by the title, this chapter is set in 1989. It is told in the third person, from the perspective of Sam, the little boy in the truck in which Laura hitched a ride in the previous chapter. The events recounted in this chapter occur shortly before Laura encounters Sam and Bernard.

Sam wakes up to the sound of the phone ringing. Bernard is still passed out drunk from the night before, as is his habit. Sam answers the phone and speaks to ‘the man with the funny voice’ (p.29), who tells him to wake Bernard up. After several failed attempts to rouse Bernard, the man on the phone tells Sam to throw water on him, as ‘*He’ll kill [Sam] if he hears he missed this call*’ (p.29). Sam does as he is told, throwing a beer on Bernard when water does not work. Bernard wakes up and wraps his hands around Sam’s throat in fury.

Bernard speaks to the man on the phone, telling him to give him half an hour to get ready as *it ‘can’t be that urgent. They’re already dead, hey?’* (p.30). After hanging up the phone, Bernard punches the boy in the face for waking him up and then orders him to clean up his own blood on the floor. Sam mops the floor with a kitchen towel while Bernard showers and then showers himself. He is hungry, but all there is to eat is a week-old banana. Sam reveals that Bernard is his uncle, his mother’s half-brother, and that he has been living with him for a few months.

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Together, Bernard and Sam drive down to the local police station in Bernard's pickup truck, where they are ushered into a courtyard. There is a large, foul-smelling mound covered in black plastic in the courtyard. Bernard and the man from the phone pull away the black plastic, revealing the contents underneath and 'laughed like they'd never seen anything so funny' (p.31). It is suggested that Sam has seen 'that sort of thing' (p.31) before and is used to it.

Bernard then drives them home, swaps the pickup for his larger truck and returns to the police station. Sam hopes that Bernard will let him stay in the truck, but Bernard says that he must help with the loading, and drags him out of the cab. They don plastic jumpsuits and rubber gloves and masks before starting to load the truck.

It is revealed that the mound under the black plastic is a pile of dead, bloodied bodies. The man from the phone watches from his office as Bernard, Sam and two policeman load the bodies into the back of the truck. As he moves the bodies, Sam reflects that he never saw his mother and father after they died, as 'The police said there was nothing left of them' (p.32).

Bernard, Sam and the policemen clean up after the bodies have been loaded into the truck. Bernard and the policemen are 'laughing because they were so close to being sick from the smell' (p.32). The stench does not bother Sam because he 'had smelled it before' (p.32).

Sam and Bernard set off in the loaded truck, as they have a long journey ahead of them. Sam is hungry, but Bernard does not have any food for them; eventually, they stop at a petrol station and Bernard buys Sam a single sandwich, after which he is still hungry.

Analysis

"Sam" (p.3-14)

The tension between Clare and Sam at their first meeting is palpable. Clare is resistant to being questioned and Sam is finding interviewing her much more difficult than he anticipated, despite the fact that he is well prepared. This chapter serves to establish the characterisation of both Sam and Clare. The young academic is earnest, eager, but perhaps a little naïve, while the author is cagey and unwelcoming. Their initial meeting also establishes the power dynamic between them, with Clare firmly seizing the upper hand.

It is clear that Clare is uncomfortable talking about her past as she resists answering many of Sam's questions. This serves to intrigue the reader, suggesting that the author has something to hide. Many of the central mysteries of the novel are hinted at in this chapter. When Sam remembers meeting the author in Amsterdam, for instance, he evasively hints that this was not the only time the two have met in the past: 'There was the other time, too, of course' (p.3). Sam does not elaborate, but this brief statement hints at a shared, but unspoken past between the two, a past that neither is willing to acknowledge. Clare's elusive answer about her sister also suggests that there is more to her sibling's death than meets the eye — another mystery that will be unravelled during the course of the novel.

Clare's resistance to being interviewed for Sam's biography is emphasised when she cancels their next meeting. Sam uses this time to do some research on apartheid censorship at the Western Cape Archives instead, hinting that this will become an important issue later in the novel as well. At the Archives, Sam encounters mostly people researching their own pasts or family genealogies. This alludes to the obsession of white South Africans with understanding their roots, with finding out how they arrived in South Africa or from where they might have come. It also hints at Sam's own feelings of lost identity.

Sam's friend Greg is introduced at this stage. Sam describes Greg as 'morally and socially engaged' (p.10) and Greg becomes a kind of representative mouthpiece (however dubiously) for the white South African middle-class. Greg also serves as a sounding board for Sam, who is grappling with his identity as a 'local' versus being a 'foreigner' or 'tourist' (p.11). In this first conversation, Greg and Sam discuss the issue of what is a fair tip to pay the local car guards. Greg is of the opinion that, as a tourist (despite Sam's protestations), Sam should pay more than he does because he is a local and has 'been giving for years' (p.11). Greg lists how many people he employs and the charitable acts he performs, citing this as a reason why he should give a lesser tip to the car guards.

Greg's comments suggest that he feels that his charitable actions are owed to those whom he views as part of the previously disadvantaged sector of society. He presents the employment of his domestic worker, nanny (known only as Nonyameko) and gardener as a form of social responsibility. Emphasising that he 'give[s] so much already' (p.11) indicates that he believes he is repaying some kind of debt. The author seems to be suggesting that, even in post-apartheid South Africa, white middle-class citizens are rather condescendingly redressing the wrongs of apartheid by indulging in forms of charity, which they mete out to the poorer classes and which hints at 'white guilt'. Greg's patronising attitude is shown up when he suggests, in the next breath, that he and Sam leave his son, Dylan, with Nonyameko so that they can visit the exclusive Waterfront shopping centre, simply because Greg 'feel[s] like shopping' and a movie (p.11).

At their next meeting, the mystery surrounding the death of Clare's sister, Nora, is deepened when Clare reveals that Nora married a 'public figure', thereby 'marking herself for death' (p.12). This suggests to the reader that Nora married a prominent political figure, although the orientation of her politics — whether she was aligned with the apartheid government or part of the opposition — is not yet clear.

A shared, but unacknowledged past between Clare and Sam is hinted at yet not explained as Sam experiences a 'flash of memory' (p.14) when he looks at Clare. This memory is 'instantly suppress[ed]' because Sam 'can't allow [himself] to think about the past, not yet' (p.14). This indicates that Sam's memory of Clare is a painful one and **foreshadows** something yet to be revealed by the text.



Foreshadowing

occurs in a novel when there is a subtle hint or warning of something significant that will occur later on in the text.

"**Absolution**" (p.15-22)

The introduction of this extract from Clare's latest book, *Absolution*, is significant, as it contradicts her earlier statement to Sam that she is not interested in writing an autobiography. *Absolution* is clearly autobiographical, though Clare has made the rather unusual decision to write her memories in the third person. This suggests that Clare is distancing herself from her recollections of her own life and calls into question the reliability of the memories she recounts.

This chapter also introduces another major theme in the novel: crime and the fear of violence in post-apartheid South Africa. The home invasion detailed in this chapter is the incident that prompts Clare to sell her home and move into the 'secured fortress' in which she resides when Sam meets her. Clare's fear of violation is palpable in this chapter. She is paralysed with fear when confronted with armed intruders. Yet, in a rather contradictory manner, she also seems to want to deny or underplay the danger of crime. Her home is unsecured because, for years, she resists getting an alarm or upgrading her security, despite being encouraged to do so. Her assistant, Marie, is so fearful of crime that she purchases a gun without Clare's knowledge. Clare is perversely angry to discover that Marie has the gun, despite the fact that Marie was able to chase off the intruders with the weapon. Clare seems to want to turn a blind eye to the extent of crime and the reality of the threat that it poses to her.

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Note that there is also a subtle comedic element in Clare's telling of the home invasion. It is present in the image of Marie with a pistol firing wildly at the intruders who then run off and in the dialogue between Clare and Marie in the immediate aftermath of the home invasion (p.18).

More of Nora's history is also revealed in this chapter. The photograph that is nearly destroyed by a bullet from Marie's gun shows a young Nora at a political rally, looking authoritative and superior. The fact that she is depicted at a political rally suggests that the 'public figure' (p.12) to whom she was married was a politician, a suggestion that is reinforced by the fact that Nora was assassinated not long after the picture was taken (p.22). Clare's image of her sister resisting change, 'in denial of the currents of history' (p.22) indicates that her sister was aligned with the apartheid government.

There is a brief mention of Clare's daughter, Laura, in this chapter. As Clare remembers the attack on her cousin's farm many years ago, she realises that by this time, 'Laura had already disappeared' (p.19). Another mystery is thus introduced to the reader: what happened to Clare's daughter?

"Clare" (p.23-28)

Clare's diary, and her attempts to reconstruct the final days before her daughter's disappearance, reflect two impulses: a desire to reconnect with her lost daughter (indicated by her use of the second person, 'you', to address Laura directly) and a need for closure. Clare was never given an official explanation for Laura's disappearance. Her daughter simply vanished without a trace. Clare's reconstruction of her disappearance is fraught with uncertainties, but, at the same time, this private diary seems to give a more honest insight into the author's emotions than the third-person extracts of *Absolution*.

This chapter suggests that Laura was an anti-apartheid activist and was involved in what may have been considered as terrorist activities during the apartheid era. Clare mentions an 'explosion' (p.23) for which Laura is responsible and Laura appears to be fleeing the scene of some crime. Clare wonders, at one point, whether she would have been able to support Laura had she confided in her mother: whether Clare would have encouraged Laura to prioritise her own safety, or have had the courage to condone her daughter's activities as part of the struggle against apartheid for the sake of the 'greater good' (p.25).

It is no coincidence that the boy in the truck in which Laura hitches a lift is called Sam (p.27). The reader immediately suspects, and it is later confirmed, that the little boy in the truck is Sam Leroux, Clare's biographer. He is also the boy that Clare mentions earlier on in this chapter, who may 'tell his own story, in a way that [Clare] cannot' (p.24). This is the first hint at the nature of the shared past between Sam and Clare. Sam was witness to the final days of Clare's daughter, Laura.

"1989" (p.29-32)

In this chapter, the reader is given an insight into the story of Sam, the young boy who Laura later encounters when she is hitchhiking (and who grows up to be Sam Leroux, Clare's biographer). The chapter is narrated in the third person from Sam's perspective and the change in narrative style reflects that of a young child. The language is simpler and the sentences are longer, rambling and more child-like.

Sam is orphaned and living with Bernard, his mother's brutish half-brother. Bernard is a violent drunk who is clearly incapable of caring for Sam properly. The little boy is neglected, starving and inadequately clothed. It is not yet revealed how Sam's parents died, but Sam does mention that there was 'nothing left' (p.32) of their bodies, suggesting that their end was violent.

Bernard appears to be involved in suspicious dealings with the police. He is called by one of the senior officials ('the man with the funny voice' [p.29]) to pick up a large pile of dead bodies from the police station. The implication is that the bodies are those of prisoners who have died in

police custody, perhaps under torture, and whose deaths are being covered up by the police. It is Bernard's job to transport these bodies elsewhere, perhaps to make sure that they disappear without a trace. This appears to be a regular occurrence. The man on the phone is familiar to Sam and, on two occasions, the little boy mentions that the scene of the dead bodies is something that he has seen before.



Questions

1. Consider Sam's observation that Clare is 'affecting to look uninterested in the present meeting, but there's too much energy in the boredom' (p.3). What does this suggest about Clare's character? (3)

2. Sam recalls a publicity shot of Clare holding a baby cheetah, which was used on the back of her books early on in her career. She tells Sam that her 'British publisher insisted on the stupid cheetah [...] because that's what an African writer was supposed to have' (p.5). What does this suggest about the identity created for Clare as a South African author, and the market for which her publisher was catering? (3)

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3. What does Clare mean when she describes the death of her sister as 'vivisection' (p.8)? (2)

4. Do you agree with Greg's opinion that tourists have 'got to give a little more' (p.11) to car guards and beggars than locals? Provide sound reasoning for your answer. (2)

5. Describe the manner in which Clare depicts the police who respond to her home invasion (p.19-21), and comment on what this depiction suggests about her attitude towards them. (3)

6. Why is it significant that Clare begins a new diary, piecing together Laura's disappearance, around the same time that Sam begins to visit her? (2)

7. What does Clare mean when she says about Laura: 'You were a victim, but I knew you were not a "Victim"' (p.24)? (2)

8. Drawing on evidence from Clare's private journal (p.26-28) and Sam's descriptions (p.29-32), comment on the characterisation of Bernard. (3)

SUMMARIES AND
ANALYSES
SECTION I

[20]

Literary analysis

Plot analysis

The following is intended as a brief examination and suggested interpretation of the events that occur in the novel. For more in depth analysis and commentary, see the detailed summaries and analyses in the preceding 'Critical Commentary' section.

Buried secrets

Absolution is a novel that dwells in the past as much as it does the present. It tells the story of Clare Wald, an internationally-acclaimed, but reclusive South African author, and Sam Leroux, the earnest young academic who has been commissioned to write her biography.

Clare and Sam's working relationship is complicated by a secret that neither will acknowledge. A secret that has been buried so deeply in their pasts that it seems almost impossible to articulate. Their presence in each other's lives results in both of them being forced to confront the guilt and personal traumas of decades past. At the same time, Clare and Sam are negotiating the complicated socio-political landscape of post-apartheid South Africa, grappling with their own identities and the implications of the persistent poverty and crime in the country.

Tormented by the disappearance of her daughter

As the complex, multi-layered narrative of *Absolution* unfolds, we discover that Clare's daughter, Laura, was a political activist during apartheid and then disappeared in 1989. Clare is plagued by her daughter's unexplained disappearance. She spends a good deal of time attempting to piece together a coherent account of Laura's final days, using the notebooks and letter that Laura left for her.

In time, it becomes apparent that the account left by Laura is far from accurate. The journal entries in her notebook, for instance, were fabricated for her mother's benefit. The entries are all that Clare has, however, and she clings to her daughter's words as she deals with her grief and tries to find closure.

Clare's private journal, which is written in the form of a letter to Laura, reveals her feelings of pain and guilt regarding her daughter. Clare believes that she failed as a mother and wonders whether Laura might have turned away from her dangerous political activities had she been provided with the right guidance and love.

Clare feels she also failed Laura by refusing to take Sam into her home and care for him when he was a child. Shortly after Laura's disappearance, the orphaned Sam appeared on Clare's doorstep with two of Laura's associates, who assumed that Clare would take care of the child. Yet Clare refused to take responsibility for Sam, assuming that he was no more than one of her daughter's 'strays'.

Plagued by the traumas of his childhood

Sam's connection to Laura ran deeper than Clare realised, however, since Laura was a friend and associate of Sam's parents, Peter and Ilse, who were anti-apartheid activists. When Peter and Ilse

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were killed by their own explosive device during a botched attack on a police station, Laura became a second mother to Sam, though he was forced to live with his neglectful half-uncle Bernard.

Bernard was a truck driver whose illicit operations included transporting and disposing of the bodies of prisoners who died in police custody. During one of their trips, while Bernard took a nap at a deserted roadside picnic spot, Sam got behind the wheel of the truck and drove over his half-uncle, killing Bernard instantly (though Sam later remembers another version of the incident, in which Laura was the one behind the wheel of the truck, not he).

Shortly afterwards, Laura (who, according to Clare's version of events, is on the run after perpetrating an attack on a local oil refinery) appears at the picnic spot and takes Sam with her to a farm outside of Beaufort West, where her political associates are gathered.

Laura disappears soon after taking Sam to the farm and her fate is never discovered. She asks her colleagues, Lionel and Timothy, to take Sam and her belongings to her mother. When Clare rejects Sam, Lionel and Timothy leave him with his aunt, Ellen, who takes him in begrudgingly.

As an adult, Sam continues to be plagued by the traumas of his childhood: the death of his parents; the murder of his uncle; Laura's disappearance; and Clare's rejection. His fascination and obsession with Clare progresses from a deeply-felt connection with her books as a child to a professional academic career specialising in her works. His interactions with her reveal a deep-seated need for her affection and approval, telling indications of the lingering wounds from his childhood.

Activist or government agent?

As Sam's investigations into Clare's life — and, by extension, Laura's disappearance — progress, he discovers some unpalatable 'truths' that shift his perception of his own history. He tracks down Laura's former associates, Timothy and Lionel, and discovers that Laura's political orientation may not have been aligned with that of his parents, when the men inform him that Laura was fighting for the 'wrong side' (p.304).

Sam is faced with the horrifying possibility that Laura was an operative of the apartheid-era government and, as the trusted friend of his parents, may have been responsible for the act of sabotage that took their lives.

This revelation devastates Sam and radically alters his vision of Laura, but he chooses not to share this information with Clare, even when he and Clare finally acknowledge their past connection. Sam believes that Clare would not recover from knowing this possibility. Even though she has imagined the gruesome, torturous end to which her daughter might have come, Clare is comforted by the belief that Laura was fighting 'for the greater good' in ending the apartheid regime, no matter how extreme her actions.

The betrayal

Clare's guilt stems not only from her perceived failings as a mother, but also from her betrayal of her sister, Nora. The wife of a prominent government official, Nora had adopted apartheid ideology and she and her husband were assassinated by an ANC operative, while they were lying in bed.

Decades later, in her new book (also titled *Absolution*), Clare admits that she believes she played a part in their murders. During one of the political meetings she regularly attended, Clare disclosed the whereabouts of Nora and her husband, Stephan, in front of anti-apartheid activists (who had every reason to target them) and, two days later, the couple was found dead.

Clare's feelings of guilt are complicated by her uncertainty surrounding her motives for betraying her sister. She admits that she was fully conscious of the potential consequences when she revealed Nora and Stephan's whereabouts. Her relationship with her sister had always been fraught, even as children, since Nora was a vindictive and malicious girl with a propensity to commit violence. After the birth of her son, Mark, Clare also had reason to suspect that her childless sister was attempting to have her declared an unfit mother in order to take custody of the boy.

Clare is divided. Was her wish to be rid of Nora driven by her desire to protect herself and her family or politically motivated, an opportunity to strike a significant blow against the apartheid regime by eliminating one of its most powerful proponents?

If her betrayal was politically motivated, Clare is partially absolved of guilt because her actions would have been helping to eliminate apartheid 'for the greater good' and, in the spirit of political amnesty, forgivable. If her motivations were purely selfish and to be rid of Nora, however, then her actions would have been heinous and unpardonable.

Clare vacillates between the personal and the political, between forgiveness and guilt (personified by Nora's ghost, who visits her at night). She even asks Mark, who is a lawyer, to judge her case and pass a verdict on her guilt. Mark is resentful of the role she forces him to play, however, and diminishes his mother's actions by dismissing her as a malicious gossip.

Confronting the past

Both Sam and Clare are haunted by past traumas and feelings of guilt. They are also inextricably linked to one another through their connection to Laura. Their renewed contact with one another forces them to confront the pain that has been suppressed for so many years and, as each grapples for closure, they question the nature of truth, forgiveness and absolution.

Character analysis

Who are the people in Absolution and what are they like? This section provides succinct descriptions of the main and supporting characters, focusing on their personalities, relationships and roles in the novel.

Clare Wald

Clare Wald is an internationally-recognised, critically-acclaimed South African author, who has published numerous novels throughout the course of her career. Now an elderly woman, she is irascible, stubborn and reclusive, increasingly reluctant to give interviews to the press or to reveal any details of her personal life. She is divorced, and lives in an upmarket home in Bishopscourt, Cape Town, with her personal assistant, Marie.

Reluctant interviewee

At the beginning of the novel, Clare has reluctantly agreed to partake in a series of interviews with a young academic, Sam Leroux, who has been commissioned to write her official biography. Clare is unwelcoming and difficult at first. Her relationship with Sam is more complicated than it first appears and, as the novel progresses, she gradually softens towards him. In the process, the reader learns of their shared history and the secrets they are keeping from one another. Sam's reappearance in her life forces Clare to confront traumas and emotions that she has long kept repressed.

Distraught mother

Clare is plagued by her past. Her daughter, Laura, was a political activist who disappeared towards the end of the apartheid era. Clare believes that she was involved in dangerous anti-apartheid activities and that her disappearance (and assumed death) came at the hands of government operatives who took her into custody. The relationship between mother and daughter was strained, particularly towards the end of Laura's life. In the months before her disappearance, Laura visited her mother even less and their relationship became increasingly tense.

Clare is convinced that she failed Laura as a mother, and wonders whether her daughter might still be alive and safe if she had been more loving and supportive towards her. Her obsessive reading of her daughter's notebooks, along with her extensive collection of reports and clippings, demonstrate her deep-seated desire to reconnect with her daughter and her need to find closure regarding Laura's disappearance.

It is through Laura that Sam Leroux and Clare are connected. Sam is the son of Laura's friends and political associates, Ilse and Peter, who died in a botched bomb attack that left Sam orphaned. Laura feels responsible for the child and, though she does not reveal his true origins to her mother, she entrusts his care to Clare when she is forced into exile. Clare, however, turns the boy away. This is another way in which Clare feels she has failed not only her daughter, but Sam, who was clearly in desperate need of her help.

Guilty betrayer

There is another source of guilt in Clare's past: her belief that she was indirectly responsible for the assassinations of her sister and brother-in-law. Stephan Pretorius was a high-ranking official of the apartheid government. Clare's sister, Nora, married Stephan, despite her family's more liberal political leanings. Nora and Clare's relationship had been fraught with difficulty since childhood.

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Nora was a jealous and spiteful child who grew into a vindictive adult, and Clare believed that her sister was a threat to her family.

During a meeting of a clandestine political group, Clare revealed the whereabouts of Nora and Stephan to a suspected member of the ANC armed wing, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK), and the couple was assassinated the following night. Clare grapples with her motives in betraying her sister: was she driven by personal vindictiveness or political imperatives? Stephan's assassination was a blow to the oppressive apartheid government, but Clare also benefited personally from eliminating Nora's presence in her life.

Clare's new book, *Absolution*, provides her with the opportunity not only to examine her motives, but also to confess publicly to her 'crime' through a fictional medium. The classification of the book as a fictional novel protects her from repercussions, while the occasion to confess also eases her burden of guilt. Writing is the means through which Clare exorcises the demons of her past. Her personal journal, written in the form of a letter to Laura, allows her to reconnect with her daughter and question her own role as a mother, while the publication of her new book, *Absolution*, is a more public declaration of her shortcomings. In both instances, it is through the written word that Clare seeks absolution and forgiveness.

Repentant egocentric?

Whether Clare is successful in her quest for absolution or not, is questionable. By the close of the novel, she has made amends with Sam and become a kind of mother figure to him, fulfilling his need for a maternal presence in his life and simultaneously allowing her to make up for her shortcomings with her own children; yet, it is unclear whether she has truly made peace with her involvement in her sister's death, or whether she has found closure with regard to her daughter. Indeed, Laura's fate is never discovered.

Clare is an interesting and complex character, but not altogether likeable. She is introspective and intellectually brilliant, but frequently betrays a tendency to be self-involved and even arrogant. She likes to believe that she is the one who 'dealt the deck' (p.370) and that she is in control of her surroundings and relationships. Despite her declared disdain for the attitudes of the wealthy and privileged, she enjoys the benefits afforded to her by her success. She is also deeply mistrustful and reluctant to invest herself in personal relationships. Even after she has established a bond with Sam, for example, she does 'not trust him, and never shall' (p.385).

Sam Leroux

Sam Leroux is a promising young academic who is hand-picked by Clare (with ulterior motives) to write her official biography. Sam was born and raised in South Africa, but has spent several years studying and working in America and, when he returns to the country of his birth to write Clare's biography, he is in the unique position of being an 'insider outsider': neither a foreigner nor a local.

Murderer or accomplice?

Sam's past is marked by tragedy. His parents were anti-apartheid activists who were killed in the process of trying to stage a bomb attack on a local police station in the late 1980s, leaving Sam an orphan. After his aunt Ellen refuses to take him in, he is forced to live with his mother's half-brother, Bernard, who is abusive and neglectful.

Bernard is a truck driver who is involved in illegal dealings with the police. The novel describes how he transports and disposes of the bodies of prisoners who have died in custody. It is on one of these illegal runs that Sam, delirious with starvation and thirst and profoundly damaged by Bernard's

mistreatment of him, runs over his uncle with the truck as Bernard lies sleeping on the ground at a roadside picnic spot. Soon afterwards, Laura finds Sam and takes him on the run with her.

Bernard's murder is something that plagues Sam into adulthood. It is a secret that he does not confess, even to his wife; however, in conversation with Clare, Sam suddenly recalls 'a different version' (p.375) of Bernard's demise. A version in which Laura was behind the wheel of the truck, rather than Sam. In this account, they 'did it together' (p.375). The reader may have cause to be sceptical of Sam's sudden flash of memory, though. By drawing Laura in to the crime, Sam could be lessening the burden of his own guilt for the murder and simultaneously asserting his bond with Laura.

Rejected orphan

After Bernard's murder, Laura takes Sam to a smallholding outside Beaufort West, where her political associates are gathered. At this point, they part ways. Laura leaves with another man, presumably to live in exile, and entrusts Sam's care to her friends and colleagues, Lionel and Timothy. She hands over her notebooks and a letter to her mother to the two men and asks them to take Sam to Clare's house on Canigou Avenue, assuming that Clare will take him in. When they arrive on her doorstep, however, Clare denies responsibility for the boy and turns him away.

Clare's rejection has an impact on Sam that is as profound as the deaths of his parents and Bernard's murder. Being turned away at her door erodes Sam's already fragile sense of self-worth and forces him to turn to his aunt Ellen, who makes no secret of her resentment at having to take responsibility for him. As an adolescent, he becomes increasingly obsessed with Clare Wald through her novels, regarding them as 'keys that opened the library of his memory' (p.233). In the absence of his own mother, and Laura, Clare comes to represent a kind of lost mother figure to him.

Sabotaged by low self-esteem

Sam's fascination with Clare extends into his adulthood and her works become the focus of his academic career. When he is asked to write her biography, it is not only a great boost to his career, but an opportunity to become a part of her life. He is desperate for her approval and, during the early stages of their interviews in particular, is plagued by a feeling of inadequacy. When she offhandedly calls him 'darling', he is seized by a desperate delight and admits that he 'want[s] to hear her call [him] *darling* again' and for 'her to hug [him] at the end of each meeting, pat [his] head, tell [him he's] doing a good job' (p.73).

Sam's desperation for Clare's approval is revealing of the lingering insecurities wrought by his blighted childhood. As an adult, he is frequently timid and unsure of himself and prone to questioning his own actions. His American wife, Sarah, represents a kind of antidote to his feelings of insecurity. After half a lifetime of being shunted aside and neglected, she offers Sam 'more than a corner' (p.271) of her life. When his aunt Ellen is murdered in her home during an armed robbery, Sarah becomes Sam's only remaining emotional tie, a reason to 'throw in his lot' (p.271) with life in America.

A foreign local

Sam's adoption of America as his new home destabilises his sense of nationality. When he eventually returns to South Africa, he is no longer a local, but not quite a foreigner, either. His status as a 'local visitor' allows him to offer unique insights into the social problems of the country and its idiosyncrasies. These observations most frequently take the form of a commentary on crime and poverty in the country, both of which are presented as legacies of apartheid. While he is dining in an upmarket café chain, for instance, he feels an indignant surge of irritation when he is bothered by a beggar, but then immediately feels 'outraged at [his] own outrage' (p.202) that someone who is clearly destitute should approach him for a few coins as he is enjoying an expensive coffee and muffin.

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Sam, therefore, grapples with two major issues through the course of the novel: the traumas of his childhood — including the upsetting discoveries he makes about his past through the course of his research for his book and the distressing memories that his presence in South Africa unearths — and his identity as a ‘foreign local’ as he tries to negotiate a space for himself within the social-political landscape of the new South Africa.

Laura Wald

Laura is a complex and fascinating character in that her presence in the novel is mediated through the other characters’ experiences and memories of her. Laura is the daughter of Clare Wald, a friend of Sam’s parents and a headstrong political activist. She disappeared in 1989 and is presumed dead. Her fate is never discovered.

Activist or government agent?

Her story is told through Clare’s reconstruction of her final days. Clare writes a journal in the form of a letter to her daughter and bases her narrative on the letter and notebooks that her daughter bequeathed her. Using these sources, Clare pieces together her daughter’s activities, political leanings and character. She believes that Laura was a secretive, but passionate activist in the anti-apartheid movement. Clare considers her daughter to be capable of taking extreme and dangerous measures to achieve her political ends. Ultimately, Clare judges Laura’s actions in the context of the struggle for the ‘greater good’.

The reader soon comes to realise that Clare’s portrayal of her daughter is flawed. When Sam reconnects with Timothy and Lionel, Laura’s associates in the struggle movement, they suggest that Laura was in fact ‘on the *wrong* side’ (p.304), that she was not an anti-apartheid activist at all, but a government operative. Sam is dumbfounded, in disbelief and devastated at the prospect. This ‘revelation’ calls into question Clare’s entire narrative of Laura’s life, convinced as she is that her daughter was entirely motivated by the belief that apartheid was an unjust system. Sam chooses not to reveal Timothy and Lionel’s information to Clare, believing that it would ‘destroy her’ (p.371).

Undercover avenger

Sam is devastated that Laura is not who he believed her to be — a trusted friend to his parents and, after their deaths, the closest person he had to a mother. He is plagued by the possibility that she was responsible for sabotaging his parent’s mission and causing the bomb that killed his parents to explode too soon.

Through the excerpts that Clare shares from Laura’s earlier notebooks, the reader discovers that Laura intentionally befriended Sam’s parents, Peter and Ilse. Laura’s entries suggest that she was seeking revenge on Ilse for some transgression, to make her ‘face the consequences’ (p.267) of her actions. Clare believes that this transgression was the affair that Ilse had with Laura’s father, William, some years before, but, like Sam, the reader comes to suspect that Laura’s interest in Peter and Ilse was, in fact, politically motivated.

Deceptive, mysterious ghost

Laura remains an enigmatic character. Even the final notebook, which Clare relies on to reconstruct her daughter’s final days and meeting with Sam, is revealed to be a fabrication. Laura wrote it especially for her mother, to account for Sam’s existence while concealing her association with his parents.

Laura’s earlier notebooks are guarded and ambiguous, carefully composed in order not to incriminate herself or her colleagues. Even the nature of her relationship with ‘X’, the only person in whom

she regularly confides, is unclear. Clare believes 'X' to be a former lover from Laura's university days, but his hold over Laura is patently obvious and the reader suspects that he may, in fact, be her political 'handler'.

Despite her dubious political motivations, Laura's role in the novel is pivotal. She is the cornerstone of the relationship between Clare and Sam, the reason that they are brought together. It is her continued presence in their lives, however ephemeral, that forces them to confront the traumas of their pasts.

Mark Wald

Mark Wald is another character whose presence in the novel is mediated; in this instance, through his depiction in Clare's 'fictional' book, *Absolution*. It is almost exclusively through the excerpts of *Absolution* that the reader comes to know Mark and it should, therefore, be kept in mind that his portrayal is influenced by his mother's perceptions and motivations.

Resentful son

Mark is a successful Johannesburg-based lawyer, with a wife and twin children. Clare has a strained relationship with Mark's family and they rarely stay with her when they visit Cape Town, opting to stay with Mark's father and stepmother instead. Mark tends to stay with Clare when he is in Cape Town alone on business, nonetheless, and it is during one of his stays (which Clare relates in her new book, *Absolution*, despite his pleas that she leave him out of it) that the reader comes to learn more about his character.

Mark and Clare have a difficult and somewhat combative relationship. In an email to Sam (the only instance where the reader has access to Mark's character through his own words), Mark calls his mother 'a duplicitous and self-serving woman who says whatever she thinks will make her appear in the best light' (p.38). Clare, meanwhile, presents an unflattering portrait of Mark in *Absolution*, describing him as overweight and florid.

Reluctant confessor

Despite (or perhaps even because of) their difficult relationship, Clare assigns Mark the role of her confessor in *Absolution*, choosing to reveal her secret regarding her involvement in the assassination of Nora and Stephan to him. As he is a lawyer, she casts him as her judge and jury. He, in turn, is resentful of her imposition and unsure whether she wants him to behave as her son or her judge (p.352).

Mark's resentment prompts him to dismiss Clare as a malicious gossip at first, downplaying the importance of the role she believed she had played in striking a significant blow to the apartheid government. Later, he repays her confession with one of his own: he admits that, in the months before her disappearance, Laura approached him to ask for money, saying that she wanted to 'get out' (p.354) of her involvement in political activities. Mark refused her, thinking she wanted the money for some other purpose.

Mark is another character in search of absolution. Though Clare is furious with him, she refrains from expressing her anger and, when he asks her forgiveness, she tells him that only Laura can grant him forgiveness (p.356). They share an unusually tender goodbye the following day, which suggests that their mutual confession served to bring them closer. The reader doubts, however, that this new-found intimacy could survive Clare's betrayal of his request not to relay his confession in her new book.

Sarah

Sarah is Sam's American wife, who works as a journalist for a major US newspaper. When Sam returns to South Africa to write Clare's biography, Sarah requests a transfer to Johannesburg so that she can join him and, in Part II of the novel, she arrives in the country to work as the Africa correspondent for the newspaper.

Emotional ally

Sam meets Sarah in New York when he joins the university literary club during his doctoral studies. He quickly develops an attachment to her. Sarah reminds him of Laura, in both her 'energetic curiosity' and 'olive-blond complexion' (p.237). Though he resists telling her about his childhood at first, he slowly begins to reveal the traumas of his past as their relationship progresses. Sarah accompanies him to South Africa after the murder of his aunt Ellen, providing him with support and comfort.

Sarah is Sam's emotional stalwart and source of strength. It is only when Sarah joins him in South Africa that Sam allows the emotional toll of his interviews with Clare to overwhelm him, knowing that she will 'put [him] back together again' (p.205). Sarah also provides an illuminating outsider's perspective on South African society; when she asks Sam why there are locks all over aunt Ellen's house (p.329), for instance, highlighting the paranoia over crime and security in the country.

Greg

Greg is Sam's friend. He is a Cape Town-based art curator and gallery owner. Sam met Greg while he was studying in New York. Sam stays with Greg in Cape Town for several weeks, while he conducts his initial interviews with Clare. Greg is a single father to his infant son, Dylan.

Remorseful middle class white?

From their first meeting, Greg is established as a socially defiant, flamboyant character. He tells Sam that his parents want him to remain in America, implying that they believe that South Africa will deteriorate under black governance, but Greg is determined to return to the country to 'prove [them] wrong' (p.236). Sam describes Greg as 'morally and socially engaged' (p.10) and he comes to rely on his friend to help him negotiate the unfamiliar territory of post-apartheid South Africa.

Greg is portrayed, somewhat hesitantly, as a kind of mouthpiece representing the views of white middle-class South Africans. Greg purports to be liberal in his politics, but he often betrays his subscription to crude stereotypes. An example of this can be seen when he tells Sam not to give his ice cream to the children begging in Stellenbosch, as it will encourage them to ask for money and this will, eventually, escalate into them buying drugs and 'end[ing] up dead in the street' (p.100).

Greg is also representative of the 'white guilt' phenomenon in South Africa. The idea that white South Africans feel guilty for their past and current privileges and try to assuage that guilt by 'giving [back]' (p.11) to those who were disadvantaged by apartheid. Greg encourages Sam to tip car guards generously, for example, saying that 'It can never be too much because they need it more than [he]' (p.10). This sense of guilt and resultant charity is often revealed as somewhat superficial, however. On one occasion, for example, Greg waxes lyrical about helping the less fortunate and then immediately suggests that they go to the upmarket Waterfront shopping centre simply because he 'feel[s] like shopping' (p.11).

Uncertain citizen

Greg is a character who often reveals the foibles of South African society: the hollowness of ‘politically correct’ views and the inauthentic nature of the tourist industry. Though he suggests that Sam visit Robben Island to help him “reconnect” with the country’ (p.47), for instance, he later lectures Sam on ‘atrocious tourism’ (p.49), accusing him of expecting to ‘buy catharsis’ (p.48). He also points out that the vendors selling trinkets in Stellenbosch are probably all citizens from other African countries and the souvenirs they are selling are likely to be Chinese imports (p.100).

Despite expressing his youthful determination to remain in South Africa when he first meets Sam, Greg contemplates emigrating after falling victim to an attempted break-in. He suggests to Sam that white people ‘don’t belong here now’ (p.159). His words suggesting that reconciliation is an empty concept in the new South Africa.

Ms White

Ms White is the pseudonym that Clare assigns to the police investigator in charge of her home invasion case in her book, *Absolution*. Though her race is never explicitly mentioned, it is implied that she is black and Clare’s naming of her is an ironic gesture towards what she represents in the book: the racial tensions that continue to fester in post-apartheid South Africa.

Antagonistic accuser

Ms White is antagonistic and combative towards Clare, apparently resentful towards her based solely on her race and privilege. Despite the fact that Clare has fallen victim to a home invasion, Ms White continuously implies that Clare is a kind of criminal herself. She tells Clare that ‘victimhood is a kind of delinquency’ (p.131) and suggests that Clare was at fault for not being ‘more careful’ (p.131). She deliberately undermines Clare and asserts her authority, provoking Clare into losing her temper and behaving like a ‘[white] madam’ (p.131).

Ms White also serves to highlight another one of the central thematic concerns of the novel. The contrast between being a ‘foreigner’ and a ‘local’. Though Clare was born in South Africa, just as her parents and grandparents were, Ms White suggests that she is ‘a kind of visitor’ (p.78). Clare protests that she has ‘made a point [...] of washing [herself] in every culture of this country’ (p.78), but Ms White insists that Clare ‘remain[s] unchanged by the experience’ and is ‘still quite foreign’, just as ‘those settler ancestors’ of hers were (p.78).

Ms White’s accusations reveal the belief that Clare’s European roots and white skin mean that she has no right to call herself South African. Though Clare disagrees vehemently, the fact that she has ‘made a point’ (p.78) of proving her ‘South African-ness’ suggests a certain insecurity in that identity.

Marie de Wet

Marie is Clare’s live-in personal assistant, an elderly woman herself, who cares for Clare’s day-to-day needs. She is paranoid about security, having secretly bought a gun to protect them in the Canigou Avenue house and insisting that they move to a more secure property after the home invasion. Clare is dismissive of her ‘old-fashioned opinions on the majority government or blacks in general or the rights of sexual minorities’ (p.206-207), but, at the same time, is dependent on Marie.

Self-reliant conservative

Marie is an underdeveloped character in the novel. She is rarely depicted speaking and her purpose in the narrative is to highlight how helpless Clare has become in her old age. Clare is unable to cook or even make herself a cup of coffee without Marie's assistance. Sam describes their relationship as an 'unusual domestic arrangement, which is too intimate, too symbiotic to be only a business matter' (p.306). The estate agent who sells Clare the Bishopscourt house makes a similar assumption when he implies that the two women are in a romantic relationship (p.53). Despite this, there is no other suggestion in the novel that their bond is anything more than platonic, and the character of Marie primarily serves as a means to reveal Clare's vulnerability and lack of independence, despite her belief otherwise.

Adam

Adam is Clare's gardener, who she employs when she moves into the house in Bishopscourt. Adam's brother was the original designer of Clare's garden and Adam is protective of his brother's work, now that he is deceased. Clare finds the garden to be too extravagant and ornamental, referring to it as her 'Country Club' (p.105) — an indication of her discomfort with the lifestyle it represents. She wishes to plant a vegetable patch and herbs in order to make it more 'functional' (p.102) and more like her previous garden in Canigou Avenue.

Guardian of the past

Adam is resistant of her plans to change the garden, insisting that they 'should leave this garden as [his] brother made it' (p.105). Though Clare tries on several occasions to convince him otherwise, Adam continues to defy her wishes. Eventually, she goes ahead with her plans behind his back, paying a part-time gardener to plant her vegetable patch on the weekend. Adam is 'grief-stricken' (p.108) when he discovers the change, viewing it as an insult to the memory of his brother.

Clare and Adam's interactions serve to highlight their uncomfortable 'master and servant' relationship. During her interviews with Sam, she frequently interrupts their dialogue to complain about him, but is reluctant to fire or even speak harshly to him. Their relationship highlights the almost unchanged split in South Africa, where there is still a divide between the 'privileged' and 'underprivileged' that is tempered by 'white guilt'. Clare is reluctant to play the role of 'imperious white madam' (p.72), fearful of what it might imply about her.

Nora and Stephan Pretorius

Nora was Clare's older sister, with whom she had a fraught relationship. Nora was a spiteful and even vicious child, jealous of Clare's position in their parents' affections. Nora tried to undermine Clare in their parents' eyes continuously, going so far as to accuse Clare of a cruel practical joke that she herself had played when they were children (p.289). As a teenager, Nora was 'threatening' (p.168) and Clare often had occasion to wonder how they could have grown up so different from one another (p.169).

Hostile relations

Nora married Stephan not out of love, but as a means of replacing her father (p.169). The Pretorius family was not welcoming to the Walds and made a point of alienating them at Nora and Stephan's wedding. Nora became indoctrinated into the way of life of the Pretorius family in the months following the wedding, though Clare implies that she was hiding their mistreatment of her from her

own family. Stephan went on to become a prominent official of the apartheid government, and was even tipped to become a future president of the nationalist party.

Nora and Stephan were unable to have children and when Clare gave birth to Mark, she began to feel threatened by Nora's interest in the child. Nora would visit her 'unannounced at odd hours', finding Clare's house in 'significant disarray' (p.311) and taking pictures to document the chaos. After concerned enquires from her parents and William's boss, and a visit from the police and a social worker, Clare came to believe that Nora was attempting to have her declared an unfit parent so that she might take custody of Mark.

Some time later, at a meeting of a radical political group of which Clare was a member, she casually 'let slip that [Nora and Stephan] were going to be in Cape Town for a few nights' (p.171) and told her associates the name of the guest house where they would be staying. The next evening, an assassin broke into the room in which Nora and Stephan were staying and killed them both. Tellingly, as the assassin pointed his gun at Nora, Stephan attempted to escape. The killer shot him in the back before turning the gun on Nora. Clare was asked to identify their mutilated bodies.

Tormenting ghosts

Clare's belief in her indirect role in their deaths plagues her with guilt. She believes that the information that she 'let slip' (p.171) led the assassin to their door, but she questions her motive in revealing their whereabouts. She 'knew the delicacy of the information' but 'chose to forget' (p.171). What she grapples with is her motivations for doing so. Was she simply trying to eliminate the threat her sister posed to her immediate family or were her motivations more lofty and political in nature, in bringing down a dangerous political figurehead of the apartheid government? Clare's confession in her new book, *Absolution*, provides her with the opportunity to tackle these conflicts in her search for forgiveness.

William Wald

William Wald is Clare's ex-husband and the father of Mark and Laura. He is a professor of law at Cape Town University and, during their marriage, Clare was aware that he had 'many mistresses [...], including a number of his students' (p.212). One of the students with whom William had an affair was Sam's mother, Ilse, shortly before she married Sam's father.

Kind-hearted philanderer?

William eventually left Clare and married one of his mistresses, Aisyah. Clare comes to believe that Aisyah represented 'a new way of living in a country alive to new promise' (p.212) to William, as this new marriage would have been illegal under the apartheid regime.

Despite his dubious romantic entanglements, William Wald appears to be a kind-hearted and decent character. He is still concerned for Clare's welfare, even after their divorce, and takes an active interest in the lives of his children. He also offered a few comforting words to young Sam at the funeral of his parents and the boy instantly trusts him (p.153).

Ellen Leroux

Ellen Leroux is Sam's aunt, with whom he lives after the deaths of his parents and Bernard. She is a teacher living in Beaufort West. The sister of Sam's mother, Ilse Leroux, Ellen refused to take her nephew in after his parents were killed, saying it was 'too great a burden' (p.153), which forced Sam to be placed in the care of Bernard. Following Bernard's demise and Clare's rejection of Sam, Ellen is forced to take responsibility for him.

Reluctant caregiver

As a child, Sam hoped that Ellen would 'treat him something like her own child' (p.231), but she is never a source of the maternal affection that he so desperately craves. He often overhears her complaining to friends of the burden he is to her (p.233). Despite the lack of open affection in their relationship, Sam is shaken when Ellen is murdered during a robbery several years later, while he is living in New York. He realises that her death has severed the last familial tie he has with South Africa.

Bernard

When Sam is orphaned and his Aunt Ellen refuses to take custody of him, he is left in the care of Bernard, a truck driver who is Sam's mother's half-brother. Two distinctly different versions of Bernard's character are offered in the novel. In Clare's private journal, she imagines him as a relatively buffoonish, but essentially harmless character, a 'brute' (p.26) in food-stained clothes who hums tunelessly along to the radio. The reader soon discovers, though, that Clare's characterisation of Bernard is based entirely on Laura's journal, the details of which are almost certainly fabricated for Clare's benefit.

Buffoon or brutal drunk?

Sam's depiction of Bernard is far more sinister and disturbing and, presumably, more accurate. Bernard is a brutal drunk who neglects and physically abuses Sam as a young boy. He is involved in suspicious dealings with the police, regularly transporting the corpses of prisoners who have died in police custody (p.31).

Sam is forced to accompany Bernard on long road trips, during which Sam is left for hours by himself at deserted truck stops while Bernard sleeps, without food or water to sustain him. It is during one of these long rest stops that Sam, driven by his misery and a delirium brought on by dehydration, climbs behind the wheel of the truck and runs over Bernard as he sleeps on the ground (p.96).

Shortly afterwards, Laura finds Sam and the two flee together. Bernard's murder plagues Sam for years afterwards and he keeps this dark secret hidden from everyone, including his wife. Towards the end of the novel, however, Sam remembers 'a different version' (p.375) of Bernard's death, one in which Laura is responsible for driving the truck and taking his uncle's life. In this new memory, Sam finds some form of absolution from his guilt.

Timothy and Lionel

Timothy and Lionel are two of Laura's associates in the struggle against the apartheid regime. In the diary that Laura leaves Clare, she claims that Timothy and Lionel are two strangers that she happens to meet hitchhiking on the road to Beaufort West. Yet this story is a fabrication, invented to protect them from persecution by the apartheid government should the diary fall into the wrong hands. At the farm in Beaufort West where her political associates are gathered, Laura leaves Sam in the care of the two men. Before leaving with another man, Laura asks them to deliver Sam, along with her personal papers, to her mother. When Clare refuses to take Sam in, Timothy and Lionel drop him off at the home of his Aunt Ellen.

Trustworthy confidants?

As an adult, Sam is convinced that Timothy and Lionel will be able to tell him what happened to Laura. He discovers that Lionel is working as an academic in the anthropology department at the same university in Johannesburg where he has secured a post. When he approaches Lionel, the

older man is shocked to see him and tries to avoid answering his questions about Laura. Later, both Lionel and Timothy arrange to have dinner one evening with Sam and Sarah.

Lionel is described as 'shabby and drawn' (p.301) and his unkempt appearance suggests that he is stressed and unhappy. In contrast, Timothy has landed a plum government job. He drives a flashy car and wears an expensive suit, and Sam describes him as 'rotten with success' (p.301). Sam's impressions of the two men suggest that neither bear a resemblance to the idealistic, earnest young men he once knew. Lionel appears to have been disappointed by life and Timothy corrupted by wealth and power.

It is Timothy who tells Sam that Laura was not who he thought she was. He suggests that she was 'on the wrong side of history' (p.303), a double agent fighting for, rather than against, the apartheid regime. While Timothy is not necessarily the most reliable source of information, Sam is devastated by the suggestion because it completely destabilises his perspective of Laura and much of his own childhood. When Timothy and Lionel leave, he hopes he will never see them again, as he does not 'want to know their version of history' (p.304).

Mr Thacker

A retired judge from London, Mr Thacker is Clare's next-door neighbour in Bishopscourt. He is portrayed as somewhat of a caricature in Clare's new book, *Absolution*, as an overblown and often comical character. A member of the 'Country Club' set (p.103), he represents the values and privilege that Clare claims to disdain. He is a pompous, interfering and condescending man who is frequently shown up as being ridiculous; for instance, when he becomes convinced that Clare is being held hostage against her will despite her assurances that she is fine.

A symbol of colonialism

As a British national, Thacker is a symbol for the history of colonialism in South Africa and he persists in subscribing to bitter racial stereotypes. His attitude towards Adam is particularly troubling. He views the gardener as little more than a possession, a servant whose sole purpose is to do his bidding and as a man who is given to drunkenness and thievery. Clare is infuriated by his attitude, but he seems blissfully unaware of the offensive nature of his views (p.103-104).

Annotated essay examples

Essay topic 1:

In an essay of approximately 600 words in length, examine the way in which Clare's gardens function as a symbol in *Absolution*, commenting particularly on their significance in the development of Clare's character. Close and relevant reference to the text in question is essential. (30)

i

NOTES ON THE ESSAY TOPIC:

- This question requires you to **examine** the symbolic significance of Clare's gardens in the novel.
- Your analysis should focus on the significance of the gardens **to the development of Clare's character** specifically.
- **Key words** include 'examine', 'gardens', 'symbol', 'significance', 'development' and 'character' — these are words that should be used in your essay.
- A **word count** has been provided.
- You are asked to **refer to the text closely**, meaning that you should include examples and quotations as supporting evidence for your argument. Avoid simply retelling the plot of the novel in your essay. Provide carefully selected, concise examples to illustrate each of the points in your argument.

	Essay	Comments
INTRODUCTION	<p><i>Absolution</i> by Patrick Flanery tackles a number of contentious issues in contemporary South African society. The characters in the novel frequently find themselves having to negotiate difficult and sensitive challenges in the post-apartheid context. One of these characters is Clare Wald, a successful author whose inner struggles with feelings of 'white guilt' are symbolised by the external environment of her garden. Clare's move from her modest home and garden in Canigou Avenue to the grand and ostentatious property in Bishopscourt bring her inner battles to the fore, <u>as each garden represents a particular set of ideals between which Clare is caught; moreover, the employment of a defiant new gardener forces Clare to adopt a role that betrays the values in which she places the utmost significance.</u></p>	<p>Note the structure of the introductory paragraph: the thesis statement is indicated in bold (this is the main argument that will be referred to throughout the essay). The <u>underlined sentences</u> give a 'preview' of the argument, as these are the topics that will be discussed in the body of the essay.</p>

	Essay	Comments
BODY	<p>One of the most difficult aspects of Clare's move from her Canigou Avenue house to the new home in Bishopscourt is having to adapt to the stark differences between the gardens of the two properties. The gardens can be viewed as a symbol for the values that Clare inwardly struggles with and vacillates between. The Canigou Avenue garden is 'functional' rather than ornamental (p.102), with its herb garden and vegetable patch. <u>There is something wholesome and down-to-earth about the ability of the garden to feed its inhabitants (p.102), and Clare appears to want to associate herself with these kinds of ideals.</u> The garden of the Bishopscourt house, meanwhile, represents the upper-class privilege and wealth with which Clare does not wish to associate herself. Clare compares the garden with an 'undulating showroom' designed to show off its owner's affluence (p.103). <u>The garden is ornamental rather than functional, symbolising very different values to the Canigou Avenue garden.</u></p> <p>The novel suggests that Clare's difficulty in adapting to her new, showy garden is connected to her feelings of 'white guilt'. She appears uncomfortable with the ostentatious show of wealth that her new garden represents and does not wish to be linked to the snobbishness and racism of neighbours like Mr Thacker. Her concern is exacerbated by the thought that her daughter, Laura, would have 'scorned [the new house] as a betrayal of familial principles' (p.110). To Clare, the garden seems to represent a kind of lingering inequality rooted in the corruption of apartheid, which saw white South Africans enjoy privilege and wealth denied to other races. By insisting that a functional and practical vegetable garden be planted in her fancy, ornamental garden, Clare is attempting to assert the ideals that she values and to show herself to be more down-to-earth than her neighbours.</p> <p>The garden is also a site of guilt and difficulty for Clare in that it is a space where she is forced to adopt the role of 'imperious white madam' (p.72). She finds it difficult to interact with her new gardener, Adam, without seeming authoritative and condescending. She frequently expresses her discomfort with having to occupy the role of 'master' in their relationship. <u>Again, this could be linked to Clare's inner battle with 'white guilt', as this relationship of 'master and servant' reveals that the split between the 'privileged' and 'underprivileged' in South African society remains largely unchanged.</u></p>	<p>In the second paragraph, the sentence in bold indicates the topic sentence (the point that this paragraph will address). The quotations and examples from the text support the claim being made by the topic sentence. The <u>underlined</u> sentences form the analysis or elaboration of this point, and explain its relevance to the thesis statement.</p> <p>Though this paragraph is linked in subject to the previous paragraph, it is a new point and therefore a new paragraph has been started. Note how, throughout the essay, direct quotations are seamlessly and grammatically incorporated into the sentences.</p> <p>Take note of the 'T-E-A' structure of this paragraph (Topic sentence – Evidence – Analysis). The sentence in bold is the topic sentence; the quotations and examples provide evidence; and the underlined sentences are the analysis of this point.</p>

	Essay	Comments
CONCLUSION	<p>Clare's garden is, therefore, an environment in which the persistent inequalities of post-apartheid South African society are subtly highlighted. The stark contrast between the modest, functional garden at Canigou Avenue and the elaborate, luxurious garden in Bishopscourt represent two conflicting sets of values that Clare is forced to negotiate. As a result, Clare's gardens come to symbolise her inner battle with feelings of 'white guilt' over the privileges and wealth she enjoys.</p>	<p>The concluding paragraph sums up the argument, drawing on words and phrases used in both the question and the essay introduction, but restated in an original way. The sentence in bold indicates a restatement of the thesis statement.</p>

Essay Topic 2:

Discuss the ways in which Patrick Flanery interrogates the nature of truth and memory in his novel *Absolution*. Your essay should be approximately 600 words in length. Close and relevant reference to the text in question is essential. (30)

i

NOTES ON THE ESSAY TOPIC:

- This question requires you to **discuss** the different methods Flanery uses to highlight the themes of memory and truth in the novel. (Be careful of essay topics that include the task word 'discuss', remember that your essay still needs to have a central argument or **thesis statement**.)
- With broad essay questions like this, **narrow down your ideas** and choose only those that are most relevant to your thesis statement. Avoid the temptation to include too many ideas within a limited word count as each of your ideas needs to be properly explained and supported by evidence from the text.
- **Key words** include 'discuss', 'interrogates', 'nature', 'truth' and 'memory' — these are words that should be used in your essay.

	Essay	Comments
INTRODUCTION	<p>The unstable and unreliable nature of memory and truth is one of the most important themes in Patrick Flanery's novel, <i>Absolution</i>. The novel suggests that 'truth' is a subjective and changeable concept, and may be different for every person. <u>Through the use of multiple narrative strands and unreliable narrators</u>, Flanery reminds the reader that no individual version of the 'truth' can be accepted without question.</p>	<p>Note the structure of the introductory paragraph: the thesis statement or main argument is indicated in bold, while the <u>underlined sentence</u> gives a 'preview' of how this argument will be explored.</p>

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