

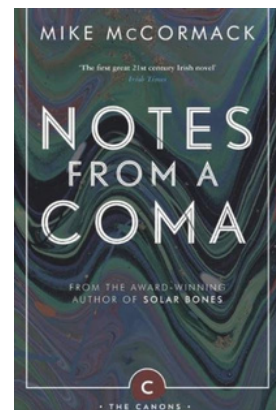


## Exploring Senior Cycle Texts

### *Notes From a Coma* by Mike McCormack



Please note: *Notes From a Coma* by Mike McCormack is a novel included as part of the List of Texts prescribed for comparative study, for examination in the year 2026 and 2027.



### Background to the novel:

*Notes From a Coma* is the tale of JJ O'Malley, a Romanian orphan who is adopted by an Irish bachelor and raised in the west of Ireland. JJ's childhood is a happy one. However, after a personal tragedy, he decides to do something radical and volunteers for a Government experiment in which prisoners are put into a deep coma and kept on a prison ship.

### Making connections with the continuum of learning



Students should be able to:

Develop an awareness of their own response to texts and analyse and justify that response.

Develop an awareness of their own responses, affective, imaginative, and intellectual, to aesthetic texts. Explore these responses relative to the texts read, generate and justify meanings and build coherent interpretations.

(Leaving Certificate Syllabus, p.13)

**The following extract is taken from the opening chapter of the novel:**

**Frank Lally**

My heart went out to Anthony that day, that's no lie. Nearly twenty years ago now but I remember it like it was last week.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon when the cars and the cattle truck came up the road. I followed them up and when I got to the yard the truck had reversed into the barn door and the vet and the bailiffs were already loading up the herd.

Anthony was standing at the back of the house with the collar pulled up around his ears. I went over and stood beside him and said nothing. What could I say?

A dirty day it was too, pissing rain all morning and a wind blowing through the yard that would shave you. No one said anything but it didn't take them more than twenty minutes to load up the whole herd—eight Friesian cows, a couple of yearlings and two calves. One by one they marched up that ramp without a bit of bother and I remember thinking we'd often had more trouble loading up two or three beasts of a Monday morning for the mart.

They pinned up the tailgate and moved off and I saw the sergeant, Jimmy Nevin, coming over to Anthony. But whatever was on his mind he thought better of it and stood off holding the gate for the truck. Anthony turned into the house without a word. I watched the truck down the bottom of the hill and saw it turn out on to the main road. Jimmy Nevin closed the gate and walked over to me.

"Before you go," he said, "give him this."

He handed me a brown envelope.

"It's the quarantine order. Six months."

Anthony got barred from Thornton's that night and it was years afterwards before he could have a drink in it.

There was a time when Anthony had a reputation for being able to start a fight in an empty room: a short temper and tidy with his fists. I'd seen him in action a few times, London and elsewhere, and he wasn't a man you wanted to do battle with. But that was all in the past—or so I thought. It all came back to him that night in Thornton's.

He'd been drinking since mid-afternoon and by eleven he was well on it. Ger, behind the bar—he was only young at the time—wouldn't serve him any more. He came outside the bar and tried to lead Anthony to the door. Anthony of course was having none of it. He'd come in under his own steam, he'd go out the same way. And he did too a few minutes later when he saw he was getting no more drink. But that wasn't the end of it.



## Please note:

- The following tasks might be completed over a series of lessons or as part of a unit of learning
- Students may wish to complete some tasks individually or in pairs/groups
- Tasks might be completed orally and/or in written format.
- Students may also wish to engage in a think, pair, share activity for some tasks.

## Support your answers with reference to the text.

- How does the opening sentence of the extract ("*My heart went out to Anthony that day, that's no lie.*") establish the tone and draw the reader into the story? Discuss the effectiveness of this opening in setting up the narrative.
- Think about the relationship between Anthony and the narrator as presented in the passage. Write a paragraph explaining how the narrator feels about Anthony and provide evidence from the text.
- How does the author use the description of the weather and the environment to enhance the mood of the passage? Explain how the setting contributes to the overall atmosphere and the reader's understanding of the events.
- With a partner, discuss the key events that happen in the passage. Create a bullet-point list or timeline, summarising the events in the passage.
- Create a visual representation of the passage using any medium of your choice (drawing, painting, digital art, collage, etc.). Focus on capturing the key elements of the story, such as: Anthony's appearance and demeanour, the weather and its impact on the scene, the barnyard setting and interactions between characters.



## A note on foreshadowing

The content of this scene foreshadows a lot of the events that will occur later in the play, perhaps most notably the bloodied hands on Lady Macbeth.

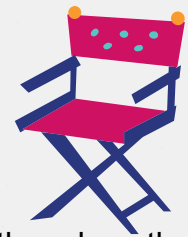


**Foreshadowing** is a technique used in literature, involving authors or playwrights dropping hints about future plot twists or developments that unfold later in the story. This can be done through direct statements or subtle clues embedded in the narrative.

Anton Chekhov, the Russian playwright, famously illustrated foreshadowing with his statement: "If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off." Essentially, this means that the initial description of the rifle should anticipate its eventual significance or use in the story.

## The role of a director in giving a play new life

Each director will have a different creative vision for a play, which is why these scenes can be reworked so effectively, so appeal to different audiences, or to highlight various aspects of the script and story.



Directors will often conduct their own research on the context of the play, the playwright or at times a more unusual theatrical concept that the director may wish to portray on stage.

The director has quite often worked through an entire script, considering and liaising with departments in costume, sound, lighting, set-design and working with individual actors on blocking, presence and body language. All of these ideas stem from the original text, in this case a script.

## Hangman's Hands

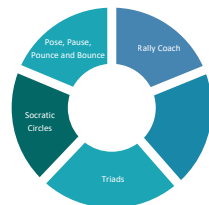
Macbeth sees his hands as akin to the hangman's after he has killed King Duncan, drawing a connection between his own act of murder and the methodical, remorseless actions of an executioner. This comparison suggests Macbeth's recognition and admission of his responsibility for the king's death.



While hanging was a ghastly death for some, the reference to the hangman's hands is in particular relation to the act of treason against the King. In these instances, the hangman would also disembowel the traitor, with the remains typically parboiled and displayed as a threatening reminder of the penalty for high treason.



## Oral Strategies Possible Activities



### Title: "Exploring Themes and Issues using Debate"

The objective of this task is to develop students' oral communication skills, critical thinking abilities, and literary analysis techniques through the exploration of the short story "*Calm with Horses*."

#### Possible Topics for Debate.

*Below are a selection of topics that arise within the story encouraging students to reflect on broader social, cultural, and ethical considerations. However, are not intended to be exhaustive.*

#### Parental Responsibility and Influence:

- Debate the role of Dymrna as a mother and her influence on Jack's upbringing. Discuss whether her actions contribute to Jack's behaviour and decisions, and examine the theme of parental responsibility in the story.

#### Gender Roles and Expectations:

- Examine the portrayal of gender roles and expectations in the story and how they influence characters' behaviour and relationships. Discuss stereotypes, gender norms, and the importance of challenging societal expectations to promote equality and inclusivity

#### Mental Health and Well-being:

- Explore the portrayal of mental health and well-being in the story. Discuss how characters like Arm cope with stress, trauma, and internal struggles, and examine the importance of mental health awareness and support in real-life communities

#### Rural Isolation and Community Support:

- Discuss the theme of rural isolation and the importance of community support networks in remote areas. Explore how characters in the story navigate challenges such as limited resources, access to services, and social isolation, and consider real-world solutions to address these issues

#### Effects of Toxic Masculinity:

- Explore the theme of toxic masculinity as depicted in the story. Debate how societal expectations of masculinity influence the characters' behaviour and relationships, and discuss the consequences of adhering to or rejecting these expectations.





## Some aspects of short story include...

### Definition of Short Story

*...an invented prose narrative shorter than a novel usually dealing with a few characters and aiming at unity of effect and often concentrating on the creation of mood rather than plot*

Merriam Webster

### Key Considerations for Short Story

A short story is a brief work of fiction that typically focuses on a single incident, character, or theme. It is shorter in length compared to novels and novellas, often ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand words. Short stories aim to convey a complete narrative arc within a limited space, usually featuring a concise plot, well-defined characters, and a clear resolution.



**Brevity:** Short stories are concise and focused, with no unnecessary digressions or subplots. They aim to tell a complete story within a relatively small word count.

**Single Plot or Theme:** Short stories usually revolve around a single plot or theme, allowing for a clear and focused narrative structure.

**Limited Character Development:** Due to their brevity, short stories often feature a smaller cast of characters and may focus more on action or plot-driven elements rather than extensive character development.

**Impactful Endings:** Short stories often conclude with a twist, revelation, or resolution that leaves a lasting impression on the reader. The ending is designed to provide closure or provoke thought.

**Exploration of Themes:** Despite their shorter length, short stories can explore complex themes and ideas, offering insights into human nature, society, and the human experience.

