



Exploring Senior Cycle Texts

The Cove by Ron Rash

The Cove by Ron Rash is a drama included as part of the Prescribed Material for the Leaving Certificate English Examination in 2026 and 2027. It may be used as the Single Text at Ordinary Level or as part of the Comparative at Ordinary Level or Higher Level.

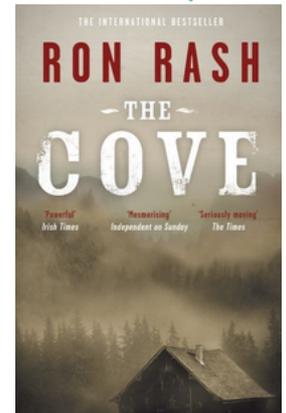


Image courtesy of ECCO Press

Please note:

- The following tasks might be completed over a series of lessons.
- You may like to adapt and adjust the tasks to suit your context.
- *The Cove* covers themes which could be considered sensitive or controversial. You may wish to consult with our READY Framework to support you in your study.



Scan the QR code or [click here](#) to access a **Getting Started with Guide** for this Text

Before you read... (Teacher Guidance)

1. Superstition and setting

Write the word “superstition” on the board. Ask students to brainstorm examples they’ve heard of. Then ask: Why do people develop superstitions? How might superstition shape life in a small, isolated community?

2. Imagining the Scene

Read aloud the first paragraph up to “no one to evict”. Ask students to sketch or describe what they picture: the man, his truck, and the setting. Then ask: What mood does this opening create?

3. Historical understanding

Direct pupils to research the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), along with its history, purpose and controversy. Discuss their findings as a class.

4. Vocabulary examination

Give students the following list of words and phrases from the extract: *brooding fatalism, evict, sullen, washout, granite cliff, murky, harbored dim reflection, erased all the names and dates, bottles and tin scraps hung from the limb like wind chimes*. Instruct pupils to:

- Predict meanings – In pairs, discuss what each word or phrase might mean in context. Use clues from word parts or familiar associations.
- Group them – Sort the words and phrases into categories (for example: landscape, mood/tone, mystery or decay).
- Mood discussion – Based on these words alone, what kind of place or story do you think this will be?



Extract

Background: This novel is set in North Carolina. In this prologue, a government worker visits a remote valley cove due to be taken over by the government, where an eerie discovery hints at the cove's dark past.

The truck's government tag always tipped them off before his Kansas accent could. After a decade of working for the TVA, he'd learned the best reception to hope for was a brooding fatalism. He had been cursed and spit at and refused a place to eat or sleep, his tires slashed and mirrors and windshields shattered. Knives and guns had been drawn, pitchforks and axes wielded.

But it had been different here. There was no one to evict and, once he explained where the lake would be, no more glares or sullen words. You can't bury that cove deep enough for me, an older man named Parton said, and those sharing the store bench with him nodded in agreement. When he asked why, Parton muttered that the cove was a place where only bad things happened. He left the men on the bench and walked back to his truck. He was used to these rural people and their superstitions, even written some down to share with other TVA staff.

He checked his directions and drove out of Mars Hill, passing the college that shared the town's unusual name. A banner draped over the entrance gate proclaimed WELCOME FUTURE CLASS OF 1957. The road rose and then made a slow descent before rising again. He parked where two slashes of blue paint brightened a post oak's trunk and walked half a mile up a washout to the deserted farmhouse whose last inhabitant, at least according to the courthouse records in Marshall, was a man named Slidell Hampton. A barn sagged nearby, next to it a family cemetery high enough that the graves need not be moved. Time and weather had erased all the names and dates except on two marble stones. He took out his handkerchief and wiped the sweat off his face, wished he'd brought the canteen left in the truck.

Beyond the farmhouse, another marked tree showed the way into the cove. At first what he followed was more the memory of a trail, places where weeds and saplings grew instead of trees, but as he moved downward the granite cliff narrowed and an old path emerged. Where the land leveled for a few yards, an ash tree rose on the left, one thick limb leaning into the cliff. Bottles and tin scraps hung from the limb like wind chimes. Shards of colored glass and yellow salt from a cow lick littered the ground. He'd seen a similar collage in Tennessee, been told its purpose was to keep evil from coming through.

He passed under the limb and the land fell sharply. The cliff loomed over him now, the trail's surface more granite than dirt. The land leveled a last time and he walked into a stand of dead chestnut trees, their limbs broken off, massive trunks cracked as though a plague of lightning had swept through the cove. The cabin still stood, flanked on its sides by two wells, only one with a rope and pulley. Rusty sags of barbed wire outlined a pasture that held nothing but briar and broom sedge. Collapsed boards smothered the barn's corbelled foundation. No sign of any recent human presence, which was all for the better. All he'd have to do was a quick deed search.

His eyes resettled on the well with the pulley. Its bucket was rust pocked, the rope a gray unraveling, but worth a try, so he left the porch. At first the crank wouldn't turn, and he had to use both hands before the lock of rust yielded and the bucket made its swaying descent. The handle and winch flaked scabs of rust as the bucket kept falling. Probably dry, he thought, but when the rope slackened and he made a tentative crank in the opposite direction, he felt the weight of water. He turned the handle a few more times before the bucket snagged.

He gave a jerk and the bucket rose again, coming up and up and finally emerging into what light the cove offered. He slackened the rope and swung the bucket away from the hole and set it on the ground. There was more than he'd expected, the bucket two-thirds full, but the water was murky. He looked back into the pail, the water still cloudy but clearing enough to see something else harbored in the bucket's bottom. He thought it might be his own dim reflection. Then the water cleared more and what lay in the bucket assumed a round and pale solidity, except for the holes where the eyes had been.



Activities Based on Extract (Teacher Guidance)

The following questions may be based on the extract included or form part of your extended study of the novel. Students may like to complete the activities individually or collaboratively.

1. In pairs, have pupils highlight or note phrases that describe the landscape and setting (e.g. “the land leveled a last time and he walked into a stand of dead chestnut trees”).
Then direct them to answer the questions:
What techniques does Rash use to create atmosphere? What impact does it create for the reader?
2. Instruct pupils to write a short paragraph exploring what the reader learns about the man from the TVA. Teacher could give them prompts such as
 - How does he see the local people and their beliefs?
 - What does his behaviour or attitude reveal about him?
 - How does Rash use him to introduce the world of the novel?
3. Direct pupils to the section of the extract saying “you can’t bury that cove deep enough for me...” In pairs, pupils should discuss and mind map all of the reasons the locals might feel this way. They should consider the ending of the prologue in their work.

Reflect and Respond (Teacher Guidance)

The following questions may be based on the extract included or form part of your extended study of the novel. Students may like to complete the activities individually or collaboratively.

1. Descriptive writing

Instruct pupils to write a descriptive piece that captures the mood of an abandoned or forgotten place. Use sensory detail and imagery to create atmosphere and tension, as Rash does in The Cove.

2. Personal essay

Give pupils the stimulus quote and have them write a personal essay.

Some silences speak louder than words.

Invite them to write a personal essay exploring moments when silence, absence, or isolation revealed something important about people or places.

3. Discursive essay

Give pupils the stimulus quote and have them write a discursive essay.

Progress always comes at a cost.

Encourage them to write a discursive essay in which you argue for or against this statement, drawing on your own experience, knowledge of history or literature, and the ideas suggested by The Cove extract.

4. Short story

Instruct pupils to write a short story that begins with someone discovering something unexpected in an isolated or eerie location.