



Exploring Senior Cycle Texts 'Calm with Horses' from *Young Skins* by Colin Barrett

Please note: *Calm with Horses* by Colin Barrett is a drama included as part of the List of Texts prescribed for comparative study, for examination in the year 2026, 2027 and 2028. *Calm with Horses* is one of seven short stories from the collection, *Young Skins*.

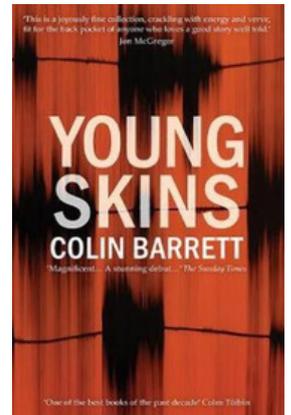


Image courtesy of A Stinging Fly

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.

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)

Pre-reading discussion:

1. "What do you think the title "Calm with Horses" suggests about the story? How does it make you feel or what images does it conjure in your mind?"

2. How might a setting contribute to the mood and tone of a narrative?





Below are two extracts from the short story ‘ *Calm with Horses* ’

Read both extracts and answer the questions that follow

The novella opens with Arm waiting patiently in the car while his boss confronts an old man who abused his family’s hospitality.....

Dympna told Arm to stay in the car while Dympna gave Fannigan a chance to plead his case. This wasn’t the way it usually went, but Arm nodded okay. Arm watched Dympna stalk up the lawn and politely hammer on the front door of the council house Fannigan shared with his mother. Eventually Dympna was let inside.

Arm slid in his earphones and sank in the passenger seat. The car was originally Dympna’s Uncle Hector’s, a battered cranberry Corolla Dympna dubbed the shitbox, its interior upholstered in tan vinyl that stank of motor oil, cigarette ash and dog. Recessed into the dash was a dead radio, its cassette-tape slot jammed with calcified gobs of blue tack, cigarette butt-ends and pre-euro-era Irish coins. The dash smelled of fused electricals. Above Arm’s head, a row of memorial cards, their laminate covers wilted by age and light, were tucked into the sun visor and a red beaded rosary chain was tangled around the inverted T of the rear-view mirror.

Three houses down, two schoolgirls were sitting on a garden wall, talking and smoking. They were in their teens, their figures swollen to shapelessness by puffa jackets and the voluminous skirts of navy-and-green convent plaid heaped up in their laps. It was ten on a Wednesday morning, and the girls, Arm figured, were mitching from school. They were sharing the one cigarette, passing it back and forth and gabbing and rocking their feet from side to side in insistent tandem. Their heads were bent low, they covered their mouths as they spoke, each the other’s confidant, and Arm could have happily sat and watched them for the rest of the morning but he sensed movement from Fannigan’s house. Dympna was stomping back down the lawn in a way that reminded Arm of his own little boy, Jack. Dympna loomed by the passenger window, made a gun shape with his finger and pointed at Arm’s head. Arm popped out his earphones. Dympna’s features, which always looked too small for his wide face, were pinched, consternated. His trackie top was zipped right up to his neck, and Arm watched the zipper shiver tautly against the protuberant knot of his Adam’s apple. Dympna let out a long sigh, like a mammy.

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We are introduced to Jack, Arm’s autistic son, aged 5. Arm is no longer with Ursula, Jack’s mother. However they maintain a collegial relationship for the sake of their son. Here we see Arm describe his son.....

Jack had his noises, and Arm could read the colour and shape of his moods in the noises as plain as day. There were the moos and coos of contentment, the squawks and trills of delight, the stream of burbles that attended his absorption in some odd task, the injurious kitten mewling for when things weren’t going his way, and then there was the deep, guttural screaming that stood for itself and nothing else. His tantrums were infrequent, but came on abruptly, and often without identifiable course. He could become violent, usually to himself, knocking his head against a wall, trying to kick through glass frames or wooden doors, mauling his own fingers until they bled. Anyone who got in his way was fair game for a savage swick. The violence was an undirected venting of pressure, and meant nothing beyond the compulsion of its expression – so hazarded the doctors. It was what it was, like the weather

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Possible Questions

1. What does the first extract tell us about the character of Dympna? Support your answer with three pieces of information from the extract?
2. Arm is introduced to us in this opening extract. What do we learn about him from this? Give evidence to support your answer.
3. The language in 'Calm with Horses' is a mixture of eloquent description and colloquial phrasing. What effect does this have on the reader and their understanding of the characters?

You might consider some of the following:

- Imagery
 - Onomatopoeia
 - Alliteration
 - Verb choice
4. 'Calm with Horses' explores relationship between male characters who live on the periphery of a small rural town. How would you describe the dynamic between Arm and Dympna based on this extract?
 5. Having read the first extract, how does the setting contribute to the narrative? What impression do you get of this setting and how might it affect the characters' actions?
 6. Exploring Arm's relationships with his autistic son Jack forms a central part of this short story.
In the second extract, how does Barrett humanise Arm's character through his relationship with his son?
 7. How does the portrayal of Jack's personality, with its unpredictable moods mirror Arm's inner world?



Oral Strategies Possible Activities



Title: "Unveiling Arm: A Podcast Interview"

The objective of this task is to engage in oral communication and creative storytelling by embodying the role of a podcast host interviewing a fictional character. By exploring Arm's character in-depth, you will develop a deeper understanding of Arm's motivations and the themes of the short story *"Calm with Horses."*

Task Description:

Imagine you are hosting a podcast centred around character exploration and development in short stories. Your next episode will feature an in-depth interview with Arm, the complex protagonist from the short story "Calm with Horses." Your goal is to delve into Arm's psyche, motivations, and the challenges he faces throughout the film.

Preparation: Re read the short story "Calm with Horses," paying close attention to Arm's character arc, relationships, and key moments.

Prepare a list of interview questions that will prompt Arm to reflect on his experiences, emotions, and decisions. Consider questions about his background, relationships with other characters, and internal conflicts.

Introduction (1 minute): Start your podcast episode with a brief introduction, setting the stage for the interview and introducing your audience to Arm in the short story "Calm with Horses."

Interview (5 minutes):

Conduct the interview as if Arm were a real person sitting across from you. Use your imagination to embody the role of the interviewer, asking the prepared questions and allowing space for Arm's responses.

Stay in character and respond to Arm's answers as if you were engaging in a real conversation. React empathetically to his experiences and emotions, seeking to deepen the exploration of his character.

Reflection (2 minutes): After the interview, take a moment to reflect on Arm's responses and the insights gained into his character. Discuss key revelations or moments of understanding that emerged during the interview.

Consider how Arm's character adds depth and richness to the narrative of "Calm with Horses," and how his experiences resonate with broader themes explored in the film.

Conclusion (1 minute): Wrap up the podcast episode with a brief conclusion, summarising the highlights of the interview and expressing gratitude to Arm for his participation.

Encourage listeners to read "Calm with Horses" and engage with the story's complex characters and themes.





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.

