Talking Heads (Alan Bennett): study notes on the monologues, themes, form and context

These notes cover the six monologues of the first series of *Talking Heads*, written by Alan Bennett for BBC television and first broadcast in 1988, for students preparing the text at A Level. The plays are in copyright, so quotations here are kept to a few words; build your own bank of short, precise quotations from the printed text.

Context and form

Alan Bennett and the Northern voice

Alan Bennett was born in Leeds in 1934, the son of a Co-operative Society butcher. He went to Oxford, became known through the revue *Beyond the Fringe* (1960), and built a long career as a playwright and diarist. His writing returns to the lower-middle-class Yorkshire world of his childhood: chapel and church, net curtains, small shops, careful respectability and the fear of what the neighbours might say. Its speech rhythms, understatement, brand names and sudden tartness are the raw material of *Talking Heads*.

The dramatic monologue

A dramatic monologue is a poem or play in which a single character speaks at length, usually to an implied listener, and in doing so reveals more about themselves than they intend. The classic examples are Victorian poems such as Browning's *My Last Duchess* and Tennyson's *Ulysses*. *Talking Heads* inherits three features of the form:

- **A single voice.** Every other character (the mother, the vicar, the neighbours, the film crew) reaches us filtered through the speaker's account, so every other character is partly the speaker's creation.
- **An implied listener.** Bennett's speakers address the camera, and so the viewer, as if we were a confidant in the room. This creates intimacy, but also complicity: we are told things we would rather not know.
- **Unintended self-revelation.** The speaker presents a flattering, or at least bearable, version of events. The audience reads past the words to a truth the speaker cannot or will not face.

Bennett lowers the register: his speakers are a vicar's wife, a house-bound widow, a bit-part actress, a man living with his mother, and the gap between their ordinariness and the seriousness of what happens to them is where the plays find their meaning.

Television origin and the shape of each play

Each monologue runs for roughly half an hour of screen time, and the television form shapes the writing:

- **Scenes marked by fades.** Each monologue is divided into four or five sections. On screen each ends with a fade to black; in the printed text this is a stage direction. Between sections time passes (days, weeks or months) and the speaker's clothes, the set or the light change. These breaks are structural hinges: the story moves on in the gap and the audience must work out

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from clues what has happened.

- **A limited set.** One or two rooms: a sitting room, a kitchen, a vestry, a cell. The sparseness directs attention to face and voice.
- **Close-up.** A pause or a glance away can contradict the words; in the printed text, read short sentences and changes of subject as the equivalent.
- **Reported speech.** Other characters are brought to life by the speaker mimicking them. The mimicry is part of the comedy, but it is never neutral: the speaker edits and judges while quoting.

The original casting is useful context: Bennett himself played Graham; Maggie Smith, Patricia Routledge, Julie Walters, Stephanie Cole and Thora Hird played Susan, Irene, Lesley, Muriel and Doris. A second series followed in 1998, but the six plays below are the ones usually set.

The unreliable narrator

Every speaker is unreliable, but not in the same way. Lesley does not understand what is happening to her; Susan understands perfectly and chooses her words with savage irony; Muriel half knows and refuses to look; Doris is reliable about facts but not about her feelings. Always say what kind of unreliability it is and how the audience is positioned to see round it.

> **Definition to learn: dramatic irony.** Dramatic irony occurs when the audience understands something about a situation that a character does not. In *Talking Heads* it is the central device: the speaker reports events, in good faith or bad, and the audience, reading the same evidence, reaches a different and usually sadder conclusion.

Comedy and pathos

Bennett's comedy is a comedy of exactness: the brand of biscuit, the make of car, the name of the shop, the one perfectly chosen detail. The humour comes from recognition and from the speaker's unawareness of how funny they are being. The pathos comes from the same source: the detail that makes us laugh also shows how small the speaker's world has become. The laugh and the ache arrive together, and the best analysis explains how one sentence produces both.

A Chip in the Sugar

Synopsis

Graham Whittaker, a middle-aged bachelor, lives with his elderly mother in a close, settled routine. On a trip into town his mother has a fall in the street and is helped up by Frank Turnbull, a smartly dressed older man who turns out to be an admirer from her youth. Mr Turnbull courts her: cafés, pubs, a new coat, loud opinions, and open contempt for Graham, his reading and the things he cares about. Mother and Mr Turnbull talk of marriage, and Graham faces being pushed out of his home and his role. Then a woman arrives at the door: Mr Turnbull is not free to marry and has done this kind of thing before. The engagement collapses, and by the final section mother and son are back in their old routine.

The speaker

Graham is gentle, precise and easily hurt. He has had a period of mental illness, still takes medication and attends a day centre. His private life is hinted at rather than stated: the magazines in his room, his sensitivity to Mr Turnbull's remarks about what a proper man is, the fact that he has never left his

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mother. His refrain, a flat statement that he said nothing, tells us he swallows his responses and leaves the audience to supply what he might have said.

Key moments

- **The café.** The title comes from Graham's noticing a chip left in the sugar bowl of a café Mr Turnbull takes them to. A tiny thing, but to Graham it stands for everything coarse and careless about the man. It shows how Graham sees the world: in small signs of standards kept or dropped.
- **Mr Turnbull's opinions.** Reported through Graham, his views on immigrants, the unemployed and Graham himself are ugly, and the mother's eager agreement is the real wound. Graham, who reads the serious papers and holds liberal views, is made to feel that his existence is an embarrassment.
- **The ending.** The revelation is delivered to Graham, who has to tell his mother. The old order returns. Whether this is a rescue or a trap is the question the play leaves open: Graham has won, but what he has won is a life already shown to be narrow and dependent.

Techniques

- **Irony of self-presentation.** Graham presents himself as the reasonable adult caring for a confused parent; the audience sees a man whose identity depends on being needed.
- **Understatement.** The most painful facts (illness, loneliness, sexuality) are mentioned in passing or not at all.

Themes

Dependence between parent and child; loneliness disguised as duty; prejudice and small-town respectability; masculinity and what counts as a proper man; the fragility of a routine that has become a whole life.

Bed Among the Lentils

Synopsis

Susan is the wife of Geoffrey, a Yorkshire village vicar. She does not believe in God, dislikes the parish and loathes the circle of adoring women, Geoffrey's fan club, who compete to arrange the flowers and admire him. She is an alcoholic. Her drinking has moved from the off-licence to the communion wine, and a drunken attempt to adjust a harvest flower arrangement ends with her on the floor before the altar. Driving to Leeds for drink, she meets Mr Ramesh, a young Asian grocer, and begins an affair with him in the storeroom of his shop, among the sacks of lentils of the title. He is the first person to tell her plainly that she is an alcoholic. She joins a support group and stops drinking. Mr Ramesh sells the shop and moves away to marry. Geoffrey discovers that a reformed alcoholic wife is a wonderful subject for sermons. Susan ends sober, admired for her recovery, and as empty as before.

The speaker

Susan is the most intelligent and self-aware of the six. She knows exactly what she thinks of her husband, the parish and herself, and says it in long, controlled, bitterly funny sentences. Her unreliability is omission, not ignorance: she reports her collapses as if they were someone else's and never says directly how much she drinks or how much she suffers. The clue is in how precisely the

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sarcasm is aimed and how little she says about herself without a joke attached.

Key moments

- **The fan club.** The parish women, each with her signature contribution, are lovingly skewered; beneath the comedy, they have a role in Geoffrey's life that Susan has refused and cannot now claim.
- **The harvest festival.** The fall among the flowers is reported with such composure that the audience must reconstruct the humiliation. Geoffrey's explanation that she was unwell is the first sign of how useful her weakness will become to him.
- **Mr Ramesh.** The affair is described with unexpected tenderness. He is kind, practical and honest, and his storeroom is the one place where Susan is not performing.
- **Geoffrey's new sermon.** In the final section Susan is sober and Geoffrey is thriving, telling her story everywhere with himself as the patient, forgiving husband. Her recovery has been absorbed into his career.

Techniques

- **Sustained irony.** Almost every sentence about religion, marriage or the parish means more than it says. The audience shares her view, which makes it disturbing when her view of herself is shown to be a defence.
- **Gaps and silences.** The fades hide the worst of the drinking and the whole decision to seek help. We see the before and the after.

Themes

Religion as performance; marriage as a public role; addiction and the stories told about it; the loneliness of the clever woman in a dull place; race and class (Mr Ramesh is treated with more respect by the play than by the village); other people's weakness as a resource for the ambitious.

A Lady of Letters

Synopsis

Irene Ruddock lives alone in the house she shared with her late mother. She writes letters: to the council, the crematorium, the chemist, her MP, anyone whose conduct falls short of her standards. The letters are, in her view, a public service. She watches the house opposite, where a young couple have moved in with a small child, and decides the child is neglected, then mistreated, and writes to say so. The police visit. The child had leukaemia and died in hospital; the parents' absences were hospital visits. Irene, already warned over an earlier campaign of letters, is sent to prison. There, to her own astonishment, she is happy: friends, classes, a job, people who need her.

The speaker

Irene is a snob, a busybody and a moraliser, and she is desperately lonely. She describes her letter-writing with pride and her neighbours with contempt, and never connects the two. Her pen is almost her only companion. The title is a pun: a woman of letters is a literary figure, and Irene is a woman of letters in a far smaller sense.

Key moments

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- **The crematorium letter.** Her complaint about the undertaker's men at her mother's funeral establishes her habit, her standards and her grief in one comic set piece.
- **Watching the house opposite.** Curiosity hardens into accusation; each section brings a more damning reading of the same small evidence, and the audience suspects the truth before she does.
- **The police visit.** The revelation about the child is reported flatly, and the flatness is the horror. For a moment she must see what her letters have done.
- **Prison.** The final section reverses everything. The woman who feared contamination from the common world shares a cell, learns from other prisoners and says she is happy. Prison gives her what freedom never did: company and purpose.

Techniques

- **Structure as argument.** The sections escalate towards catastrophe and then swerve into unexpected joy; the shape says that isolation, not wickedness, was the problem.
- **Repetition.** References to her mother and her pen are refrains that show where her emotional life is anchored.
- **Dramatic irony.** The audience reads the clues correctly; Irene reads them wrongly. Superiority turns into dread.

Themes

Loneliness and its substitutes; judgement and self-righteousness; the damage done by good intentions; institutions (prison as community rather than punishment); class and the fear of other people.

Her Big Chance

Synopsis

Lesley is an actress whose career consists of walk-on parts and a single appearance in a television serial, which she describes as if it were a leading role. Through a man met at a party she is offered a part called Travis in a film. She prepares with great seriousness and reports every conversation with the crew as evidence of her professionalism. The audience gradually understands that the film is a cheap soft-pornography production for the overseas video market, that Travis is required only to look decorative and undress, and that each crew member who praises Lesley's work goes to bed with her. The film ends; Lesley goes home and waits for the next call.

The speaker

Lesley is the most purely comic of the six and, for many readers, the most painful. She has read books about acting and uses their language constantly; she talks about professionalism and preparation; she corrects other people's grammar; she is certain of her gifts. Her unreliability is total and innocent. She never lies to us; she simply cannot see what is in front of her.

Key moments

- **Her credits.** Her inflated account of previous roles teaches the audience to divide everything she says by a large number.

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- **Building Travis.** She invents a background and inner life for a part that has none. It is funny because her approach is exactly what a serious actress would do, applied to a job that wants only her body.
- **The crew.** One by one the men are kind to her, praise her and end up in her room. She reports each as a professional relationship. The audience counts.
- **The ending.** Alone at home, describing her prospects. The fade on her hopeful face is among the cruellest endings in the collection because she is the only person who does not know it is cruel.

Techniques

- **Dramatic irony at its purest.** Everything depends on the gap between report and reality, and Bennett never allows a moment of insight to break the surface.
- **Jargon as self-deception.** The vocabulary of acting theory is her armour; it turns exploitation into training.
- **Comic timing.** The reveals are placed at the ends of sentences and sections so that the audience reaches the truth a beat before Lesley moves on.

Themes

Self-deception; the exploitation of women in a male industry; ambition and illusion; the comedy and cruelty of unawareness; loneliness disguised as independence.

Soldiering On

Synopsis

Muriel is a capable, cheerful upper-middle-class widow whose husband Ralph has just died. She organises the funeral briskly, manages her grown-up son Giles and fragile daughter Margaret, and intends to carry on as she always has. Giles takes charge of her finances and persuades her to invest in his schemes. Margaret, long treated as mentally unwell, goes into a clinic. Section by section the money disappears, the house is sold, Margaret is moved from private care into a state hospital, and Muriel is left in a small rented room by the sea. Along the way, in a scene she reports but refuses to interpret, it becomes clear that Ralph abused Margaret for years. Muriel ends alone, poorer, cut off from her son, and still insisting that she is not a tragic figure.

The speaker

Muriel speaks in the confident, jolly idiom of the committee lady. Her unreliability is a discipline: she has decided which things are to be thought about and which are not. Notice the tactics of evasion, the quick change of subject, the sensible proverb, the joke at her own expense, each closing a door the audience can see through.

Key moments

- **The funeral.** Her management of catering and guests shows her at her most competent and hints, through what she brushes aside, at how little she ever questioned Ralph.
- **Giles and the money.** The audience sees the swindle long before Muriel will name it. Her trust in her son and ignorance of finance are both class-bound and generational.

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- **Margaret.** The daughter's improvement away from home and her remarks about her father are the moral centre of the play. Muriel reports them and moves on.
- **The bedsit.** The final section strips away house, committees and standing. What remains is her determination to keep her tone, which is both admirable and a refusal to grieve.

Techniques

- **Understatement as theme.** The play is about the cost of not making a fuss; the stiff upper lip is examined rather than celebrated.
- **Structural decline.** Each fade marks another loss: money, house, daughter, son. The structure is a staircase downward.
- **Silence.** The abuse is never named directly. The gap where the naming should be is the most important silence in the collection.

Themes

Class and its blind spots; family and betrayal; denial as a way of life; ageing and the loss of status; the unspoken damage done to women within respectable families.

A Cream Cracker under the Settee

Synopsis

Doris, a widow in her seventies, has fallen while dusting a photograph she could not reach from the floor. She lies in her front room with an injured leg and talks. Her home help, Zulema, has warned her that another fall will mean the council moving her into Stafford House, the residential home she dreads. Under the settee she finds a cream cracker, proof that Zulema does not clean properly, and holds onto it as a small victory. She remembers her husband Wilfred, his unfulfilled plans, and the baby born dead and taken away by the midwife wrapped in newspaper. Evening comes. She hears people outside and does not call out. A policeman knocks and asks whether she is all right; she says she is. The light fades and she is left on the floor, having chosen her own house over rescue.

The speaker

Doris is house-proud, sharp-tongued and the most direct of the speakers. She does not deceive herself about the facts, and she is funny about Zulema, the neighbours and Wilfred. Her evasions are about feeling: the dead child is mentioned briskly, the loneliness not at all, and her decision at the end is given to us as common sense rather than despair.

Key moments

- **The fall.** Told with an eye for her own foolishness. The photograph she was dusting is of her wedding, which links the accident at once to memory and loss.
- **The cream cracker.** A crumb of evidence against Zulema, treasured as a weapon in an argument Doris will never now have. It sums up her world: standards, cleanliness and the need to be in the right.
- **Wilfred and the baby.** The memories arrive in fragments. The baby's removal in newspaper is where the comedy stops and the audience understands what Doris has carried for fifty years.
- **Stafford House and the policeman.** The home is the alternative to dying on the floor, and her

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refusal of it is the play's argument about dignity and choice. Her reply to the policeman is the decisive act of the play, made in a few words, and the fade that follows is as near as the collection comes to a death on stage.

Techniques

- **The single setting used to the full.** Doris cannot move. The play is her eyes travelling round a room she knows better than anyone.
- **Bathos.** A life's grief is set beside a biscuit, and Bennett trusts the audience to feel the contrast without being told.
- **Time of day as structure.** The light changes from afternoon to dusk, and the fading light does the work of a plot.

Themes

Ageing, independence and dignity; the fear of institutions; marriage remembered; childlessness and buried grief; cleanliness and respectability as a way of holding a life together; choice at the end of life.

Themes across the collection

Loneliness

Every speaker is alone, and every speaker has a substitute for company: a mother, a bottle, a pen, a career, a committee, a clean house. The plays measure the gap between the substitute and the real thing. Irene finds company only in prison; Susan only in a storeroom; Doris chooses her empty house over a home full of people. The form itself enacts loneliness: there is nobody else in the room.

Self-deception

The collection is a study of the stories people tell to make their lives bearable. The degree of self-knowledge varies (Lesley has none, Susan a great deal), but in every case the audience is asked to see past the story. Distinguish willed blindness (Muriel), innocent blindness (Lesley) and the clever person's refusal to apply cleverness to herself (Susan).

Class

The speakers range from Muriel's county confidence to Doris's working-class Leeds, with the lower-middle-class respectability of Graham's mother and Irene in between. Class shapes their vocabulary, fears and prejudices. Mr Turnbull's bigotry, Irene's horror of the neighbours and Muriel's trust in a son with the right accent are all class behaviours, and Bennett lets the speakers reveal them without comment.

Religion

The Church of England runs through the collection as an institution rather than a faith. Susan's play is the fullest treatment: belief is absent, ritual continues, and the vicar's wife's recovery becomes a parable for the vicar's advancement. Bennett's interest is in how religious forms survive the loss of religious content.

Ageing

Doris's fear of Stafford House, Muriel's loss of home and standing and Graham's mother's late

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romance are all about what society allows the old to want. The young are not much kinder: Giles robs his mother, Zulema patronises Doris, the crew use Lesley.

Gender

Five of the six speakers are women, and the sixth is a man whose masculinity the play calls into question. Bennett's women are confined by roles (wife, daughter, mother, actress, widow) that other people have written for them. Susan's rage at being a vicar's wife, Lesley's exploitation, Margaret's abuse and Muriel's silence about it, and Doris's childlessness all explore what the roles cost. The plays consistently show men as beneficiaries of arrangements that women pay for.

> **Exam tip.** Tie every theme to form. Do not write one paragraph on loneliness and another on the monologue form; write a paragraph on how the form creates loneliness, with evidence from two plays.

Writing about Talking Heads

Essay approaches

1. **Single play, close reading.** Take one monologue and trace one device (irony, structure, register) through its sections. Show where the device starts, where it deepens and what it does at the ending.
2. **Comparative.** Pair two plays with a common theme and a difference of treatment. Good pairs: *A Lady of Letters* and *A Cream Cracker under the Settee* (loneliness, institutions, opposite endings); *Bed Among the Lentils* and *Her Big Chance* (self-knowledge and its absence); *A Chip in the Sugar* and *Soldiering On* (family, dependence, what the ending restores or removes).
3. **Form-led.** Answer a question on the dramatic monologue by analysing what the form makes possible: the implied listener, the editing of other characters, the fades, the gap between report and reality. Use three plays briefly rather than one at length.
4. **Context-led.** Place the plays in 1980s Britain (attitudes to race, the position of women, television as a shared national medium) without letting context replace analysis.

Sample thesis statements

- In *Talking Heads* the monologue form is not a limitation but the subject: each speaker's inability to hear another voice is the cause of their situation.
- Bennett's comedy and pathos are produced by the same device, the precisely observed domestic detail, so an essay cannot separate the two without misreading the plays.
- The unreliable narrator is most devastating where the speaker is most intelligent: Susan's irony protects her from everyone except herself.

Handling quotation

Long quotations are neither needed nor wise in an examination.

- **Embedded fragments.** Quote two to five words inside your own sentence: the name of the home Doris fears, the phrase Susan uses for the parish women, the object in the sugar bowl. Then analyse the word choice.
- **Precise paraphrase.** Describe exactly what the speaker says and in what order, naming the

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section.

- **Quote the structure.** The fades, a change of costume or light, the position of a revelation in a section are textual evidence too.
- **Quote the silence.** Where a speaker avoids a subject, say so and say what surrounds the avoidance. Bennett's gaps are quotable.

Quick check: eight essay prompts with planning notes

Plan each essay before reading the model outlines in the answer block.

Prompt 1

Explore the ways in which Bennett uses the dramatic monologue form to present loneliness in two of the monologues.

> **Planning notes.** Choose two plays with different kinds of loneliness (for example Irene and Doris). Argue that the form enacts the theme: one voice, no reply. Paragraphs on the implied listener, reported speech as a substitute for company, and the endings.

Prompt 2

How far do you agree that the comedy of *Talking Heads* is always at the speaker's expense?

> **Planning notes.** An evaluation question, so take a position. Suggested line: often but not always. Lesley's comedy is at her expense; Susan's is at everyone else's, until the end; Doris's jokes about Zulema are a form of strength. Distinguish laughing at from laughing with.

Prompt 3

Discuss the presentation of marriage and family in *Bed Among the Lentils* and *Soldiering On*.

> **Planning notes.** Both plays show respectable marriages built on a woman's silence. Geoffrey profits from Susan's weakness; Ralph's crime is buried under Muriel's good manners. Compare how each woman reports her husband. Use the children (Giles, Margaret) and the parish (the fan club) as the wider family. Conclude on who benefits.

Prompt 4

Examine the role of the unreliable narrator in *Her Big Chance*.

> **Planning notes.** Define the device, then trace it: the inflated credits, the preparation for Travis, the crew, the ending. Show that Lesley's unreliability is innocent and complete. Discuss what the audience's superior knowledge does to comedy and sympathy, and whether Bennett is cruel to her.

Prompt 5

To what extent are the endings of the monologues bleak?

> **Planning notes.** Sort the endings: restoration (Graham), apparent recovery (Susan), apparent

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happiness (Irene), illusion (Lesley), decline (Muriel), death (Doris). Argue that even the apparently happy endings are ironic and that bleakness is tempered by the dignity of the speakers. Use three plays in detail.

Prompt 6

Explore how Bennett presents class and prejudice in *A Chip in the Sugar* and one other monologue.

Planning notes. Mr Turnbull's opinions and the mother's adoption of them; Graham's liberal values as a source of isolation. Pair with *A Lady of Letters* (Irene's horror of the neighbours) or *Bed Among the Lentils* (the village's view of Mr Ramesh). Argue that prejudice is shown as a comfort for the frightened rather than a conviction.

Prompt 7

Discuss the importance of objects and small details in two of the monologues.

Planning notes. The chip in the sugar, the cream cracker, Irene's pen, the communion wine, Travis's costume. Argue that objects carry the emotional weight the speakers will not voice. Link to the limited set and the close-up. Show how a detail works first as a joke and then as a symbol.

Prompt 8

How does Bennett use structure (the division of each monologue into sections) to shape the audience's response?

Planning notes. Explain the fades and the gaps in time. Choose plays where the gaps hide a decisive event (Susan's decision to seek help; Muriel's losses; the child's death in *A Lady of Letters*). Discuss the effect of making the audience reconstruct what happened. Contrast with *A Cream Cracker under the Settee*, where the fading light replaces the fade to black.

Model paragraph outlines

Prompt 1 (loneliness and form). Introduction: one voice and no reply is the condition of the speakers' lives, not just the method. Paragraph 1: Irene's letters are a one-sided conversation with the world and the form mirrors them; her reported encounters are conversations she controls by retelling. Paragraph 2: Doris's room is the whole world; reported speech brings Wilfred and Zulema in, but the audience is the only listener who stays. Paragraph 3: the endings reverse each other, Irene gaining company in prison and Doris refusing it on the doorstep, and in both the audience is the confidant who cannot help. Conclusion: the form makes the viewer a substitute companion.

Prompt 2 (comedy at the speaker's expense). Introduction: often but not always; Bennett varies the target deliberately. Paragraph 1: Lesley, where every laugh is produced by what she cannot see. Paragraph 2: Susan, whose irony is aimed outward at the parish and the husband, and whose collapse is reported so drily that we laugh with her at her humiliation, until the final section turns the irony back on her. Paragraph 3: Doris, whose jokes are a way of holding on; laughing with her is a form of respect. Conclusion: the plays where we laugh with the speaker are the ones that hurt most at the end.

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Prompt 3 (marriage and family). Introduction: both plays present respectable marriages founded on the wife's silence. Paragraph 1: Susan's account of Geoffrey as a performer of piety, and the fan club as the family he prefers. Paragraph 2: Muriel's account of Ralph as a good chap, and the funeral as a performance of a happy family. Paragraph 3: the children: Margaret's illness as the hidden cost of the Carpenter marriage, Giles continuing the pattern of male entitlement; the storeroom as the only honest relationship in Susan's play. Conclusion: the man profits and the woman pays, seen through what the women decline to say.

Prompt 4 (unreliable narrator in Her Big Chance). Introduction: define unreliability and state that Lesley's is innocent, total and sustained. Paragraph 1: the credits and the acting jargon as the vocabulary of her self-image. Paragraph 2: the crew, counted by the audience and not by Lesley, as the clearest dramatic irony in the collection. Paragraph 3: the ending and the question of cruelty: Bennett withholds any moment of insight, which is harsh, but her confidence is also a kind of survival.

Prompt 5 (bleak endings). Introduction: sort the six endings and argue that bleakness is the rule but is complicated by irony and dignity. Paragraph 1: Doris's choice as the bleakest ending and the most dignified. Paragraph 2: Irene's happiness in prison as a genuine but ironic release: society had to lock her up to give her company. Paragraph 3: Graham's restored routine as the ending that looks happiest and is most quietly dreadful, because the audience has seen what the routine is. Conclusion: bleak about circumstances, generous about people.

Prompt 6 (class and prejudice). Introduction: prejudice is shown as a comfort adopted by frightened people. Paragraph 1: Mr Turnbull's remarks, reported by Graham, and the mother's new opinions; Graham's liberal views isolate him in his own home. Paragraph 2: Irene's letters as prejudice disguised as public duty, with the neighbours opposite standing for everything she fears. Paragraph 3: because we hear prejudice only in reported speech, Bennett never has to endorse or condemn it; the audience judges the speaker by how they report it. Conclusion: prejudice is a way of belonging, reached for by those who most need to belong.

Prompt 7 (objects and details). Introduction: in a form with no action, objects carry the plot and the feeling. Paragraph 1: the chip in the sugar as Graham's standard of judgement and a comic image of his fastidiousness. Paragraph 2: the cream cracker as evidence, trophy and symbol of a life spent keeping things clean; set against the newspaper that wrapped the baby, it shows how Doris's values grew from loss. Conclusion: the detail works first as a joke and then as a symbol, which is the movement from comedy to pathos in miniature.

Prompt 8 (structure and sections). Introduction: the gaps between sections are where the decisive events happen. Paragraph 1: Susan's recovery takes place between sections; we meet a sober woman without having seen the struggle, which makes Geoffrey's use of her story more shocking. Paragraph 2: Muriel's losses are announced after the fact, one per section, a staircase of discoveries. Paragraph 3: *A Cream Cracker under the Settee* runs continuously and the fading daylight does the structural work; there is no gap in which to look away. Conclusion: the sections make the audience a detective, and the one play without gaps makes the audience a witness.

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