

The Keeper's Hour

A short extract, and a long way inside one mind. Read it twice before you answer anything.

6 min read

Before you read

- **free indirect style** — third-person narration that takes on a character's own words and rhythms
- **interior monologue** — the unspoken flow of a character's thought, set down as it runs
- **syntax** — the arrangement of words into sentences, and the effects that arrangement produces
- **elision** — the omission of something a reader is left to supply
- **cadence** — the rhythm and fall of a sentence
- **modernism** — an early twentieth-century movement that broke with inherited narrative form



A lighthouse on a low Atlantic headland in the west of Ireland, fog standing off the water

¹ Half four, and the light going already, the way it does here in November, not setting so much as being taken back. She wound the clock. Forty-one steps and the brass wants doing, and who is there to say it wants doing, only herself, and herself saying it in her mother's voice, which was never her own and is now.

² The fog had been standing off Inishturk since noon, not coming in, not going. Waiting, she thought, and then: no, it is not waiting, it has no interest in you, it is only cold air over warm water and you are a woman of sixty alone on a rock giving weather a mind because you have been three weeks without

one to talk to.

³ The boat on Thursday. Flour, and the oil, and a letter perhaps from Breda, who writes the way she speaks, which is to say around a thing and around it and never once at it. *We are all keeping well here.* Meaning somebody is not.

⁴ Up then. The steps were the same steps. Her father had counted them aloud going up, forty-one, and she had believed for a long time that the counting was necessary, that if he stopped the tower would notice. Nine years dead and she still counted. The lamp room smelled of paraffin and the cold off the glass came at her face like water.

⁵ And out there — nothing. Grey on grey, no horizon, the sea only audible. Somewhere beyond it, she supposed, the shipping, and the cities, and Breda in her kitchen in Galway going around a thing. She lit it. The beam went out into the fog and stopped, four feet from the glass, as though it had walked into a wall.

⁶ Which is the whole of it, she thought, turning the wick down a half-turn and then back. You send it out. It does not arrive. You send it out again at nine seconds and again at nine seconds and the not-arriving is not the point, the sending is the point, and if a ship comes through and does not see it the ship is still safer for the thing having been sent.

⁷ Forty-one steps down. The brass could wait doing tomorrow.

Part A Reading closely

Circle the letter next to the best answer.

1. How long is it since the narrator last spoke with anyone?
 - A Since Thursday
 - B Nine days
 - C Three weeks
 - D Nine years
2. In paragraph 3, the comment that Breda writes *around a thing and around it and never once at it* implies that
 - A Breda is a careless and ungrammatical writer
 - B Breda is avoiding telling her something
 - C the letters are delayed by the weather
 - D Breda has stopped writing altogether
3. What happens to the beam when the narrator lights the lamp?
 - A It sweeps clear to the horizon
 - B It fails to light at all
 - C It illuminates a ship passing close inshore
 - D It stops a few feet beyond the glass in the fog
4. The counting of the forty-one steps functions in the extract mainly as
 - A an inherited habit that connects her to her dead father
 - B a method of measuring how quickly she is ageing
 - C a safety procedure required of lighthouse keepers
 - D evidence that she has begun to lose her memory

Part B Analysis

Answer in two or three sentences each. Quote briefly where a quotation does work a paraphrase cannot.

5. The extract opens without naming its speaker, its place or its situation. Explain what this withholding asks of the reader, and what it gains.
6. In paragraph 2 the narrator corrects herself mid-thought about the fog. Analyse what this self-correction reveals about her state of mind.
7. Examine the sentence beginning *Forty-one steps and the brass wants doing*. Comment on how its construction imitates the movement of thought.
8. The narrator says of her mother's voice that it *was never her own and is now*. Explain the two claims packed into that phrase.

9. Paragraph 6 turns a practical observation about fog into something close to a statement of belief. Trace how the passage makes that turn without announcing it.

Part C Think deeper

There is no single right answer here. Take a position and support it with reasoning and close reference to the text.

10. The final line returns to the brass. Argue for what that return accomplishes, and whether the extract would be stronger or weaker ending at paragraph 6.

11. Modernist prose is often accused of difficulty for its own sake. Using this extract, make the case that its difficulty is doing necessary work — or that it is not.

12. Rewrite paragraph 1 in plain, conventional third-person narration. Then explain precisely what is lost, and whether anything is gained.

13. The narrator decides that *the sending is the point*. Is this a consoling conclusion or a bleak one? Defend your reading against the other.

14. Isolation is the extract's situation but arguably not its subject. What would you argue the subject is, and what in the text supports you?

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. **C** — three weeks (para 2) | 2. **B** — she is avoiding the real news (para 3)
3. **D** — it stops four feet from the glass (para 5) | 4. **A** — an inherited habit tied to her father (para 4)

Part B

6. The reader must assemble the situation from fragments — the clock, the steps, the boat on Thursday — which places them inside the narrator's mind rather than beside it. Nothing is explained because nothing would be explained to oneself. Credit answers that connect the withholding to the interiority rather than treating it as mere obscurity.
7. She catches herself attributing intention to weather and corrects it with some severity, which shows both that solitude is pushing her towards personifying her surroundings and that she is still alert enough to police it. The self-knowledge is the point: she diagnoses her own loneliness in the act of resisting it.
8. The sentence runs on through *and*, doubles back on itself with *only herself*, *and herself saying it*, and arrives at the mother's voice by association rather than logic. The syntax enacts a thought catching on something and following it. Accept any answer tying the grammar to the movement rather than just labelling it a long sentence.
9. First, that the standards she holds herself to were imposed from outside and once felt alien; second, that she has now so thoroughly absorbed them that no distinction remains. The compression of inheritance and surrender into four words is the achievement — strong answers say so.
10. The turn proceeds by letting a literal fact accumulate significance: the beam stops, she registers it, and *which is the whole of it* lets the image stand for the life without ever naming the comparison. The nine-second repetition then supplies the rhythm of persistence. Credit answers that identify the absence of an explicit metaphorical signal.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the position taken.

11. Strong answers see that the return to the brass refuses exaltation and restores routine, which is either a deflation or a quiet endorsement of continuing. Either reading is acceptable if argued from the cadence of the final line.
12. Look for engagement with specific difficulties in this text — withheld exposition, unmarked shifts between report and thought — and a judgement about whether each earns its cost. Blanket positions on modernism with no textual anchor are weak answers.
13. The rewriting matters as much as the explanation. Expect the student to notice what the plain version gains in clarity and loses in interiority, voice and the sense of thought in motion.
14. Both readings are available: consolation in duty performed regardless of result, bleakness in a life justified by an unverifiable effect. The requirement is that the student argue against the reading they reject, not merely assert their own.
15. Accept inheritance, duty, the persistence of the dead in the living, self-knowledge, or the value of unwitnessed work. The test is textual support. Prompt with: which details would be unnecessary if isolation were really the subject?

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