Scottish Literature in the Classroom

Crossover Short Story Collection

National 5 and Higher English:

George Mackay Brown's 'Andrina'

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Using the Teaching Materials

The Scottish Literature in the Classroom project aims to support teachers of secondary English by providing resources on the new Scottish Set Texts at National 5 and Higher.

This teaching guide is part of a series focused on the Crossover Short Story Collection for National 5 and Higher. Each guide provides contextual information on the story and author and a detailed reading of the given text, as well as discussion prompts and practice exam questions. Other online resources that may be helpful to teachers and students are also listed here.

Teachers are encouraged to utilise and adapt materials to best suit their own classrooms, combining with their own activities on, for example, narrative structure and literary analysis.

'Andrina' was written by George Mackay Brown. It is reproduced here by kind permission of the estate and representatives and under the terms of the SQA permissions arrangement. Teaching resource written by Jennifer Farrar. Thanks also to Rhona Brown, Maureen Farrell, Corey Gibson, Pip Osmond-Williams, Ronnie Young, and teacher colleagues across Scotland for their guidance and support.

Context

Story overview

‘Andrina’ is a ghost story set on the fictional island community of Seleskay. Narrated by retired seafarer, Captain Bill Torvald, it is the story of his mysterious relationship with a young girl called Andrina, who had been coming to care for him at home every afternoon for a period of time over the winter months.

Bill recalls that Andrina’s visits to him stopped around the time he caught a terrible cold around the end of February – ‘the worst’ he had for years. Throughout his period of illness, he continued to hope Andrina might visit to offer him some cheer and succour at this difficult time. Yet Andrina never returns.

Once he is feeling better, Bill goes to the local village to stock up on provisions and to see if anyone there knew of Andrina and where she might have gone. No one – not even Tina the postmistress who ‘knew everybody and everything’ – had heard of Andrina, leaving Bill feeling ‘utterly bewildered’ and somewhat hurt by the young girl’s apparent desertion.

When he returns home, Bill finds a letter from Australia has been delivered, posted in October, some five months earlier. It is from Sigrid, a woman he had a passionate relationship with as a young man on Seleskay. When she fell pregnant, Bill abandoned her and ran off to a life at sea.

Sigrid’s letter recalls her attempts to follow him across the world, noting that she stopped in Australia to pursue a new life with their baby daughter. Sigrid informs Bill that he had a granddaughter, Andrina, who longed to visit the grandfather she had never met in Scotland in order to ‘do things for him’, like making him tea and tending to his fire. Yet Sigrid writes to tell Bill that Andrina has sadly died in Tasmania, Australia, meaning such a visit will no longer be possible.

Author background

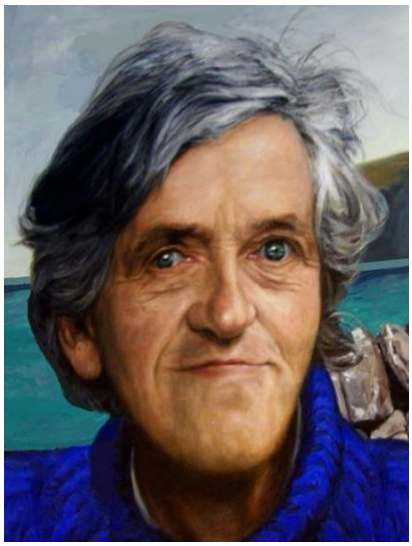

Image: Portrait of George Mackay Brown by Fred Schley. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

George Mackay Brown is a key figure in 20th-century Scottish literature who achieved acclaim as poet, novelist, and short-story writer. Born in Stromness, Orkney, in 1921, he died there in 1996. His many awards include a Society of Authors Travel Award, 1968; SAC Literature Prize, 1969; Katherine Mansfield Menton Short Story Prize, 1971; Hon. LLD from Dundee University, 1977; OBE, 1974; James Tait Black Memorial Prize 1987 (for *The Golden Bird*). He was nominated for the Booker Prize in 1994 for his novel *Beside the Ocean of Time*. His work explores the history, mythology, landscape, and speech of Orkney, an archipelago of approximately 70 islands off Scotland's

Publication details

The story collection *Andrina and Other Stories* was first published in 1983 by the Hogarth Press and has been reprinted by several other publishing houses since.

Online resources

- The short story 'Andrina' was adapted as a television play for BBC Scotland in 1981 by Bill Forsyth, who also directed the production: https://youtu.be/J-Dl7FEKSOk?si=Tje-iWrPoWUc8_XY
- The Thresholds Blog, hosted by the University of Chichester, which specialises in the short story form, has this resource about Mackay Brown's works: Profiling George Mackay Brown - THRESHOLDS
- As 'Andrina' has been on the previous iteration of the SQA Scottish Texts list, the BBC Bitesize website also carries a comprehensive analysis and associated resources: Plot - Andrina - Higher English Revision - BBC Bitesize

- The Scottish Poetry Library also carries a biographical profile, with links to Mackay Brown's poetic works: George Mackay Brown - Poet - Scottish Poetry Library

The version of 'Andrina' printed here and published on the SQA website is the one that will be used in exams, valid from session 2025–26 onwards. (The story itself is not covered by the CC BY-NC-SA license.)

'Andrina'

by George Mackay Brown

Andrina comes to see me every afternoon in winter, just before it gets dark. She lights my lamp, sets the peat fire in a blaze, sees that there is enough water in my bucket that stands on the wall niche. If I have a cold (which isn't often, I'm a tough old seaman) she fusses a little, puts an extra peat or two on the fire, fills a stone hot-water bottle, puts an old thick jersey about my shoulders.

That good Andrina — as soon as she has gone, after her occasional ministrations to keep pleurisy or pneumonia away — I throw the jersey from my shoulders and mix myself a toddy, whisky and hot water and sugar. The hot water bottle in the bed will be cold long before I climb into it, round about midnight: having read my few chapters of Conrad.

Towards the end of February last year I did get a very bad cold, the worst for years. I woke up, shuddering, one morning, and crawled between fire and cupboard, gasping like a fish out of water, to get a breakfast ready. (Not that I had an appetite.) There was a stone lodged somewhere in my right lung, that blocked my breath.

I forced down a few tasteless mouthfuls, and drank hot ugly tea. There was nothing to do after that but get back to bed with my book. Reading was no pleasure either — my head was a block of pulsing wood.

'Well,' I thought, 'Andrina'll be here in five or six hours' time. She won't be able to do much for me. This cold, or flu, or whatever it is, will run its course. Still, it'll cheer me to see the girl.'

* * * * *

Andrina did not come that afternoon. I expected her with the first cluster of shadows: the slow lift of the latch, the low greeting, the 'tut-tut' of sweet disapproval at some of the things she saw as soon as the lamp was burning … I was, though, in that strange

fatalistic mood that sometimes accompanies a fever, when a man doesn't really care what happens. If the house was to go on fire, he might think, 'What's this, flames?' and try to save himself: but it wouldn't horrify or thrill him.

I accepted that afternoon, when the window was blackness at last with a first salting of stars, that for some reason or another Andrina couldn't come. I fell asleep again.

I woke up. A gray light at the window. My throat was dry — there was a fire in my face — my head was more throbbingly wooden than ever. I got up, my feet flashing with cold pain on the stone floor, drank a cup of water, and climbed back into bed. My teeth actually clacked and chattered in my head for five minutes or more — a thing I had only read about before.

I slept again, and woke up just as the winter sun was making brief stained glass of sea and sky. It was, again, Andrina's time. Today there were things she could do for me: get aspirin from the shop, surround my grayness with three or four very hot bottles, mix the strongest toddy in the world. A few words from her would be like a bell-buoy to a sailor lost in a hopeless fog. She did not come.

She did not come again on the third afternoon.

I woke, tremblingly, like a ghost in a hollow stone. It was black night. Wind soughed in the chimney. There was, from time to time, spatters of rain against the window. It was the longest night of my life. I experienced, over again, some of the dull and sordid events of my life; one certain episode was repeated again and again like an ancient gramophone record being put on time after time, and a rusty needle scuttling over worn wax. The shameful images broke and melted at last into sleep. Love had been killed but many ghosts had been awakened.

When I woke up I heard, for the first time in four days, the sound of a voice. It was Stanley the postman speaking to the dog of Bighouse. 'There now, isn't that loud big words to say so early? It's just a letter for Minnie, a drapery catalogue. There's a good boy, go and tell Minnie I have a love letter for her ... Is that you, Minnie? I thought old Ben here was going to tear me in pieces then. Yes, Minnie, a fine morning, it is that ...'

I have never liked that postman — a servile lickspittle to anyone he thinks is of consequence in the island — but that morning he came past my window like a messenger of light. He opened the door without knocking (I am person of small consequence). He said, 'Letter from a long distance, skipper.' He put the letter on the chair nearest the door. I was shaping my mouth to say, 'I'm not very well. I wonder ...' If

words did come out of my mouth, they must have been whispers, a ghost appeal. He looked at the dead fire and the closed window. He said, 'Phew! It's fuggy in here, skipper. You want to get some fresh air …' Then he went, closing the door behind him. (He would not, as I had briefly hoped, be taking word to Andrina, or the doctor down in the village.)

I imagined, until I drowsed again, Captain Scott writing his few last words in the Antarctic tent.

In a day or two, of course, I was as right as rain; a tough old salt like me isn't killed off that easily.

But there was a sense of desolation on me. It was as if I had been betrayed — deliberately kicked when I was down. I came almost to the verge of self-pity. Why had my friend left me in my bad time?

Then good sense asserted itself. 'Torvald, you old fraud,' I said to myself. 'What claim have you got, anyway, on a winsome twenty-year-old? None at all. Look at it this way, man — you've had a whole winter of her kindness and consideration. She brought a lamp into your dark time: ever since the Harvest Home when (like a fool) you had too much whisky and she supported you home and rolled you unconscious into bed … Well, for some reason or another Andrina hasn't been able to come these last few days. I'll find out, today, the reason.'

It was high time for me to get to the village. There was not a crust or scraping of butter or jam in the cupboard. The shop was also the Post Office — I had to draw two weeks' pension. I promised myself a pint or two in the pub, to wash the last of that sickness out of me.

It struck me, as I trudged those two miles, that I knew nothing about Andrina at all. I had never asked, and she had said nothing. What was her father? Had she sisters and brothers? Even the district of the island where she lived had never cropped up in our talks. It was sufficient that she came every evening, soon after sunset, and performed her quiet ministrations, and lingered awhile; and left a peace behind — a sense that everything in the house was pure, as if it had stood with open doors and windows at the heart of a clean summer wind.

Yet the girl had never done, all last winter, asking me questions about myself — all the good and bad and exciting things that had happened to me. Of course I told her this and that. Old men love to make their past vivid and significant, to stand in relation to a few

trivial events in as fair and bold a light as possible. To add spice to those bits of autobiography, I let on to have been a reckless wild daring lad — a known and somewhat feared figure in many a port from Hong Kong to Durban to San Francisco. I presented to her a character somewhere between Captain Cook and Captain Hook.

And the girl loved those pieces of mingled fiction and fact; turning the wick of my lamp down a little to make everything more mysterious, stirring the peats into new flowers of flame ...

One story I did not tell her completely. It is the episode in my life that hurts me whenever I think of it (which is rarely, for that time is locked up and the key dropped deep in the Atlantic: but it haunted me — as I hinted — during my recent illness).

On her last evening at my fireside I did, I know, let drop a hint or two to Andrina — a few halfashamed half-boastful fragments. Suddenly, before I had finished — as if she could foresee and suffer the end — she had put a white look and a cold kiss on my cheek, and gone out at the door; as it turned out, for the last time.

Hurt or no, I will mention it here and now. You who looks and listen are not Andrina — to you it will seem a tale of crude country manners: a mingling of innocence and heartlessness.

In the island, fifty years ago, a young man and a young woman came together. They had known each other all their lives up to then, of course — they had sat in the school room together — but on one particular day in early summer this boy from one croft and this girl from another distant croft looked at each other with new eyes.

After the midsummer dance in the barn of the big house, they walked together across the hill through the lingering enchantment of twilight — it is never dark then — and came to the rocks and the sand and sea just as the sun was rising. For an hour and more they lingered, tranced creatures indeed, beside those bright sighings and swirlings. Far in the north-east the springs of day were beginning to surge up.

It was a tale soaked in the light of a single brief summer. The boy and the girl lived, it seemed, on each other's heartbeats. Their parents' crofts were miles apart, but they contrived to meet, as if by accident, most days; at the crossroads, in the village shop, on the side of the hill. But really these places were too earthy and open — there were too many windows — their feet drew secretly night after night to the beach with its bird-cries, its cave, its changing waters. There no one disturbed their communings — the shy

touches of hand and mouth — the words that were nonsense but that became in his mouth sometimes a sweet mysterious music — 'Sigrid'.

The boy — his future, once this idyll of a summer was ended, was to go to the university in Aberdeen and there study to be a man of security and position and some leisure — an estate his crofting ancestors had never known.

No such door was to open for Sigrid — she was bound to the few family acres — the digging of peat — the making of butter and cheese. But for a short time only. Her place would be beside the young man with whom she shared her breath and heartbeats, once he had gained his teacher's certificate. They walked day after day beside shining beckoning waters.

But one evening, at the cave, towards the end of that summer, when the corn was taking a first burnish, she had something urgent to tell him — a tremulous perilous secret thing. And at once the summertime spell was broken. He shook his head. He looked away. He looked at her again as if she were some slut who had insulted him. She put out her hand to him, her mouth trembling. He thrust her away. He turned. He ran up the beach and along the sand-track to the road above; and the ripening fields gathered him soon and hid him from her.

And the girl was left alone at the mouth of the cave, with the burden of a greater more desolate mystery on her.

The young man did not go to any seat of higher learning. That same day he was at the emigration agents in Hamnavoe, asking for an urgent immediate passage to Canada or Australia or South Africa — anywhere.

Thereafter the tale became complicated and more cruel and pathetic still. The girl followed him as best she could to his transatlantic refuge a month or so later; only to discover that the bird had flown. He had signed on a ship bound for furthest ports, as an ordinary seaman: so she was told, and she was more utterly lost than ever.

That rootlessness, for the next half century, was to be his life: making salt circles about the globe, with no secure footage anywhere. To be sure, he studied his navigation manuals, he rose at last to be a ship's officer, and more. The barren years became a burden to him. There is a time, when white hairs come, to turn one's back on long and practised skills and arts, that have long since lost their savours. This the sailor did, and he set his course homeward to his island; hoping that fifty winters might have scabbed over an old wound.

And so it was, or seemed to be. A few remembered him vaguely. The name of a certain vanished woman — who must be elderly, like himself, now — he never mentioned, nor did he ever hear it uttered. Her parents' croft was a ruin, a ruckle of stones on the side of the hill. He climbed up to it one day and looked at it coldly. No sweet ghost lingered at the end of the house, waiting for a twilight summons — 'Sigrid …'

I got my pension cashed, and a basket full of provisions, in the village shop. Tina Stewart the postmistress knew everybody and everything; all the shifting subtle web of relationship in the island. I tried devious approaches with her. What was new or strange in the island? Had anyone been taken suddenly ill? Had anybody — a young woman, for example — had to leave the island suddenly, for whatever reason? The hawk eye of Miss Stewart regarded me long and hard. No, said she, she had never known the island quieter. Nobody had come or gone. 'Only yourself, Captain Torvald, has been bedridden, I hear. You better take good care of yourself, you all alone up there. There's still a grayness in your face …' I said I was sorry to take her time up. Somebody had mentioned a name — Andrina — to me, in a certain connection. It was a matter of no importance. Could Miss Stewart, however, tell me which farm or croft this Andrina came from?

Tina looked at me a long while, then shook her head. There was nobody of that name — woman or girl or child — in the island; and there never had been, to her certain knowledge.

I paid for my messages, with trembling fingers, and left.

I felt the need of a drink. At the bar counter stood Isaac Irving the landlord. Two fishermen stood at the far end, next the fire, drinking their pints and playing dominoes.

I said, after the third whisky, 'Look, Isaac, I suppose the whole island knows that Andrina — that girl — has been coming all winter up to my place, to do a bit of cleaning and washing and cooking for me. She hasn't been for a week now and more. Do you know if there's anything the matter with her?' (What I dreaded to hear was that Andrina had suddenly fallen in love; her little rockpools of charity and kindness drowned in that huge incoming flood; and had cloistered herself against the time of her wedding.)

Isaac looked at me as if I was out of my mind. 'A young woman,' said he. 'A young woman up at your house? A home help, is she? I didn't know you had a home help. How many whiskies did you have before you came here, skipper, eh?' And he winked at the two grinning fishermen over by the fire.

I drank down my fourth whisky and prepared to go.

'Sorry, skipper,' Isaac Irving called after me. 'I think you must have imagined that girl, whatever her name is, when the fever was on you. Sometimes that happens. The only women I saw when I had the flu were hags and witches. You're lucky, skipper — a honey like Andrina!'

I was utterly bewildered. Isaac Irving knows the island and its people, if anything, even better than Tina Stewart. And he is a kindly man, not given to making fools of the lost and the delusion ridden.

* * * * *

Going home, March airs were moving over the island. The sky, almost overnight, was taller and bluer. Daffodils trumpeted, silently, the entry of spring from ditches here and there. A young lamb danced, all four feet in the air at once.

I found, lying on the table, unopened, the letter that had been delivered three mornings ago. There was an Australian postmark. It had been posted in late October.

'I followed your young flight from Seleskay half round the world, and at last stopped here in Tasmania, knowing that it was useless for me to go any farther. I have kept a silence too, because I had such regard for you that I did not want you to suffer as I had, in many ways, over the years. We are both old, maybe I am writing this in vain, for you might never have returned to Seleskay; or you might be dust or salt. I think, if you are still alive and (it may be) lonely, that what I will write might gladden you, though the end of it is sadness, like so much of life. Of your child — our child — I do not say anything, because you did not wish to acknowledge her. But that child had, in her turn, a daughter, and I think I have seen such sweetness but rarely. I thank you that you, in a sense (though unwillingly), gave that light and goodness to my age. She would have been a lamp in your winter, too, for often I spoke to her about you and that long-gone summer we shared, which was, to me at least, such a wonder. I told her nothing of the end of that time, that you and some others thought to be shameful. I told her only things that came sweetly from my mouth. And she would say, often, 'I wish I knew that grandfather of mine. Gran, do you think he's lonely? I think he would be glad of somebody to make him a pot of tea and see to his fire. Some day I'm going to Scotland and I'm going to knock on his door, wherever he lives, and I'll do things for him. Did you love him very much, gran? He must be a good person, that old sailor, ever to have been loved by you. I will see him. I'll hear the old stories from his own mouth. Most of all, of course, the love story — for you, gran, tell me nothing about that …' I am writing this

letter, Bill, to tell you this can never now be. Our granddaughter Andrina died last week, suddenly, in the first stirrings of spring …'

Later, over the fire, I thought of the brightness and burgeoning and dew that visitant had brought across the threshold of my latest winter, night after night; and how she had always come with the first shadows and the first star; but there, where she was dust, a new time was brightening earth and sea.

Full analysis

Narrator

The story is narrated in the first person by Captain Bill Torvald, a self-described 'tough old seaman' (line 4) who had returned only quite recently to his home island of Seleskay after a self-imposed exile of around 50 years. As a result, Bill is remembered only 'vaguely' (line 156) by a few elderly island residents, and the fact that he is left unattended for three days while he is very unwell with the cold suggests that he does not have a support network in place and exists on the periphery of the local community.

As narrator, Bill is honest and, at points, self-deprecating, such as when he compares himself, while ill, to 'Captain Scott writing his few last words in the Antarctic tent' (lines 63–64), suggesting he recognises where he might be wallowing in self-pity. The use of a flashback within the narrative's structure (more on this below) also supports a reflective sense of self-scrutiny, as an elderly Bill recalls painful, shameful events from his past.

Structure

Mackay Brown's short story falls loosely into 3 sections, with divisions shown in the SQA printed version shown by a line of asterisks that could suggest a shift of focus or time.

The first section, lines 1–20, is short, and sets out the current state of events or equilibrium, e.g. we learn of Andrina's caring visits to Bill and the arrival of his bad cold.

The main section or body of the story, from line 21 to 196, encompasses the main period of narrative disruption and Bill's attempt to find answers. This includes: Bill's illness; his subsequent upset at Andrina's absence while he was ill (which he initially perceives as a betrayal); his recovery and attempt to find out more about Andrina's background and whereabouts. As Bill tries to find out where Andrina may have gone, he indulges in a lengthy flashback about the one story from his life he did not share completely with her, given it was the episode that 'haunted him' during his recent illness (line 100). Indeed, Bill recalls that after he had 'let drop a hint or two' about what he had done as a young man, Andrina had 'put on a white look' and 'gone out at the door, as it turned out, for the last time' (line 104). Prompted, perhaps, by the young girl's strange response, Bill then confesses the full story to the reader, providing us with enough detail to begin to speculate

about possible – although incredible – connections between the two characters that are as yet invisible to the narrator.

Unable to find out anything about the girl from the villagers, Bill is left 'utterly bewildered', describing himself as 'delusion ridden' (line 196).

In the short section that follows the final or break (line 198), Bill returns home to find Sigrid's letter. Upon reading it, he recognises that the visits he had from his 'good Andrina' may have in fact been visitations from his granddaughter Andrina's ghost. The story concludes with a final sense of peace, as Bill reflects upon the 'brightness… burgeoning [and] brightening' Andrina brought with her into his life (line 255 to end).

Lines 1–20

The story starts in present tense, giving the impression that the daily visits from Andrina still continue. Bill tells us that Andrina tends to arrive just before dark and, by lighting the lamp and setting the 'peat fire in a blaze', she ensures that the old man has heat and light for the long winter's night ahead. While Bill describes some of Andrina's 'ministrations' as fussing (line 4), and even highlights how he resists it at times ('as soon as she has gone… I throw the jersey from around my shoulders and mix myself a toddy', line 8), it is clear the retired sea captain is fond of his visitor and appreciates her attention to his care. The word 'ministrations' could also have a double meaning, referring not only to Andrina's care, but also prefiguring her death by alluding to the work of ministers, who attend to their parishioners' souls.

Shifting to the past tense, Bill then describes the onset of his 'very bad cold' in quite vivid terms: he recalls how he 'woke up shuddering' and 'crawled' the short distance from his bed to get his breakfast of 'hot ugly tea', all the while 'gasping like a fish out of water' due to the 'stone' he imagined to be stuck in his lungs (line 12). As a result of feeling quite so poorly, Bill recalled how he had eagerly anticipated Andrina's visit later that day and predicted it would bring him some cheer.

Lines 21–76

Yet these hopes of a visit are dashed as Andrina does not arrive. Across lines 21–39, it is interesting that Mackay Brown associates Andrina's visits with softness, calm and half-light, all of which could foreshadow her spirit-like qualities: e.g., we learn she tends to arrive with the 'first cluster of shadows: the slow lift of the latch, the low greeting' (line 21). The softness of her presence contrasts with the raw, physical pain of Bill's illness: his face feels on 'fire', his feet are 'flashing with pain on the cold floor'; his teeth 'clacked and clattered' in this head (lines 31–4).

As an old sailor, Bill is fond of imagery involving the sea and weather. While lamenting her absence (lines 38–9) he compares 'a few words from her' to the lifesaving properties of a 'bell-buoy to a sailor lost in a hopeless fog'. Mackay Brown uses such images of the sea and weather as pathetic fallacy: at the peak of Bill's fever, the 'wind soughed in the chimney' while the rain 'spatters' at the window.

We also learn that Bill has been troubled by thoughts of his past while ill. During what he claims to have been 'the longest night' of his life (line 43), he replayed 'some of the dull or sordid events' from his past 'again and again like an ancient gramophone record being put on time after time, and a rusty needle scuttling over worn wax' (lines 44–6). As this simile suggests, replaying his memories of his relationship with Sigrid as a young man was unpleasant, with 'rusty' and 'worn' suggesting also an aspect of pain. His next comment: 'Love had been killed but many ghosts had been awakened' (lines 46–7) ironically – or knowingly? – foreshadows the later revelation of Andrina's visitations.

From line 47 onwards, Bill relates his recovery in a slightly breezier, less introspective tone, including his dislike for Stanley the postman ('a servile lickspittle…'), but he retains an openness and honesty about his feelings, including his sense of having been betrayed by the young woman.

Yet we also see Bill talk himself out of such worries and selfish concerns, issuing reminders to himself about how fortunate he was to have her in his life. Once again, Andrina is associated with light and heat ('she brought a lamp into your dark time…' line 73).

Lines 77–104

Resuming the slightly jauntier narrative tone once again, Bill describes his resolve to find out the reason for Andrina's absence. It is ironic that a partial answer – Sigrid's letter – is already at home waiting having been delivered by that 'lickspittle' of a postman, yet Bill takes himself off to find out more about her whereabouts.

The act of walking 'those two miles' (line 81) to the village to get provisions prompts Bill to further reflect upon the one-sided relationship he had with Andrina, in that she would ask him to relate story after story about his own life, yet he had never asked her about her own life at all. His recognition of the questions he failed to ask her (lines 82–4) seems tinged with regret. Mackay Brown continues to use calm, soft-sounding language to describe what Andrina had done for Bill during the winter months: her 'quiet ministrations', and the fact her departure 'left a peace behind – a sense that everything in the house was pure, as if it had stood with open door and windows at the heart of a clean summer wind' (lines 85–7). (NB. Contrast this image of pure air with the bluff response of Stanley the postie when he opens the door to Bill's small cottage after his three days of illness: 'Phew! It's fuggy in here, skipper!' line 59).

Reflecting how much he had enjoyed relating tales from his youth – to which he admits adding some editorial 'spice' (line 91) to make his 'past vivid and significant' (line 90) – he also recalls how Andrina had enjoyed listening to 'those pieces of mingled fiction and fact, turning the wick of my lamp down a little to make everything more mysterious…' (lines 95–96).

But it is when he turns to the story of his life that has 'haunted' him (line 100), and tells Andrina only a few 'half-ashamed, half-boastful fragments' that a change occurs (line 102). Of course, the story he partially relates is his reckless abandonment and betrayal of a pregnant girlfriend who would eventually become Andrina's much-loved grandmother. As noted above, Andrina's face blanches white (presumably with ghostly shock at realising that the grandfather she has idealised is not the man she imagined) and, planting a 'cold kiss' on Bill's cheek, she leaves the house for 'the last time' (line 104).

Lines 105–160

Bill's flashback begins with a confession-like acknowledgement to the imagined reader (or listener) that what follows may seem like an example of 'crude country manners: a mingling of innocence and heartlessness' (line 105–6). This harshness of this description could be reflective of the hard time Bill has given himself over the years, whenever he thought of an episode he admitted to finding shameful.

The poignant story Bill narrates is told from a detached third person perspective, distancing him, as older, guilty man, from the love story of the 'young man and woman' who initially 'lived… on each other's heartbeats' (line 118) and engaged in a passionate love affair, with words such as 'enchantment' and 'tranced creatures' used to describe the couple's feelings and actions towards each other.

The imagery used to describe the time is connected with light and aspects of nature, especially fertility. Their time together coincides with the lengthening days of spring and new growth ('the springs of day were beginning to surge up' (line 116)); with Bill romantically noting that the love story was 'soaked in the light of a single brief summer.' There are heavily implied references to the sexual nature of their relationship and an acknowledgment of the necessity for secrecy given they lived in such a small community and were as yet unmarried, although they had started to plan ahead for a future together once Bill had returned from university. The young couple were said to walk 'day after day beside shining beckoning waters', with the word choice of 'shining' and 'beckoning' suggesting hope and the positive, forward trajectory of their relationship (line 132).

The romantic glow of the narration dims when Bill relates what drove them apart. Symbolically, their relationship ended when the crops in the field were ripening ('the corn was taking a first burnish' (lines 133–4). According to Bill, the magic of their 'summertime spell' was broken when Sigrid broke the news of her pregnancy (a 'tremulous, perilous secret thing' (lines 134–5)). Bill's response – which has haunted him ever since – was to regard her as 'some slut who had insulted him' (line 136), with the cruelty and coarseness of language used here standing out in stark contrast. Mackay Brown's use of a series of short sentences conveys a sense of Bill's coldness and immediate detachment from the girl, and also seems to give it a visual quality, almost like a film script or stage directions: 'He shook his head. He looked away… He thrust her away. He turned. He ran up the beach…' (lines 135–9).

The isolation of the one-sentence paragraph at line 140 and heightened word choice conveys Sigrid's sadness at Bill's response: she is left 'alone' and carrying a 'burden of a greater, more desolate mystery'.

The remainder of the 'cruel and pathetic' (line 145) story recounts how young Bill fled overseas to escape his responsibility, pursued by Sigrid, until he 'signed on a ship bound for furthest ports' (line 147), leaving the young, pregnant girl 'utterly lost' (line 148). Considering the socio-historical context of this story also helps to emphasise the cruelty and cowardice of Bill's actions. Earlier in the flashback, Bill notes he could have gone to university to become a teacher, thus giving him a secure career and finances. Yet as a young woman, Sigrid did not have this option of further education: she would continue with the 'digging of peat – the making of butter, of cheese' (line 129) until Bill qualified and they could marry. As a young man, Bill could decide to run off to sea, taking job after job to gain experience that would see him promoted to 'ship's officer, and more' (line 151), while Sigrid, a young, pregnant woman, would have had no such option (or resource) available to her and instead, would have to contend with the challenges of raising a child as a single mother in a society that did not look kindly on women in such a position.

Returning after 50 years to Seleskay, a white-haired Bill hopes that the passage of time 'might have scabbed over an old wound' (line 154–155) and he instead finds himself largely forgotten rather than forgiven. As an old man, he returns to the rubble of stones that was once his parents' croft and 'looked at it coldly' (line 159). Given the confessional style of the anecdote and his shame at his past conduct, 'coldly' stands out as unusual. Could it suggest that his ability to utterly detach himself from these events over the years (by locking up memories, 'the key dropped deep in the Atlantic' line 99) has left him unfeeling and unable to comprehend? Yet, in the following line (line 159, beginning 'no sweet ghost…'), Bill indulges in some wistful thinking about Sigrid, with his word choice containing echoes of the past: 'lingered', 'twilight' and his repeated call of 'Sigrid…'.

Lines 161–196

In this penultimate section, Bill turns detective and tries to find out more about Andrina. The narration takes on a brisker, newsy style when Bill describes his interactions with the people in the village, with brief glimpses of Bill's feelings interspersed. For example, when

Bill learns from Miss Stewart that ‘there was nobody of that name… in the island, and there had never been’ (lines 173–4), we are told he pays for his shopping with ‘trembling fingers’ suggesting his disquiet (line 176).

Having headed to the pub to seek more information (and whisky), the landlord Issac tells Bill he ‘must have imagined that girl’ (line 190), leaving Bill feeling ‘utterly bewildered’ as he returns home to his cottage.

Lines 197–228

Setting a hopeful tone for this final section, Mackay Brown reminds us it is spring, a time of renewal and fresh starts. Finally discovering the letter from Australia, Bill reads it and we finally hear Sigrid’s voice and her version of events.

In contrast to Bill’s cruelty and selfishness, Sigrid is selfless, kind and forgiving. She notes that her ‘regard’ for Bill caused her to stay silent all these years because she did not want him to ‘suffer as I had, in many ways, over the years’ (lines 205-6).

This kindness extends to the version of event Sigrid told their granddaughter, Andrina, about her absent grandfather, which focused only on positive anecdotes of their time together. As a result of this favourable presentation, Andrina would speak of her longing to visit her grandfather to ‘hear the old stories from his own mouth’ and most of all, to hear him tell ‘the love story’ himself (line 221). As the reader – and of course, Bill – will remember, it was the very act of recounting his shameful role in this ‘love story’ to the (ghostly) Andrina that caused her to ‘put a white look and a cold kiss on my cheek, and gone out at the door; as it turned out, for the last time’ (lines 103–4).

The final paragraph sees Bill, now aware of both Andrina’s birth and death, musing, once again in front of a fire. Knowing he has been forgiven by Sigrid, Bill now seems to be able to consider a ‘new time’ ahead, and is grateful for the ‘brightness’ that Andrina, as ‘visitant’ had brought to him in the darkest season of the year, and to one of the darkest corners of his history.

Discussion Prompts

Introductory

- What does this story make you think, feel and wonder?
- How do you feel towards Bill Torvald, the narrator, and why do you feel that way?
- What was actually going on in the months when Bill thought he was being cared for by Andrina?
- How does Bill feel about the possibility he was being visited by his granddaughter's ghost?
- What is there to fear in this ghost story?
- How do you think you would respond to an experience like this?

Techniques

- How are we positioned by Mackay Brown to feel towards Bill Torvald?
- In what way is story-telling itself an important aspect in this story?
- There are images and words that recur throughout the story, often in relation to specific characters. What word choices/ imagery are associated with each of the main characters, Bill and Andrina/ Sigrid? What is the effect of the imagery and techniques used?
- Who is haunted by whom in this story?
- How effective is the ending, including the final letter from Sigrid, in your view?

Themes

- Does this story contain a message? If so, what is it?
- Does this story make you think of any other texts you have read, listened to or watched? What are they, and what connections exist?
- What broad themes do the characters of Bill and Sigrid/ Andrina represent?
- In what ways are the themes of this story relevant to readers today?
- What does the story have to say about memory and forgetfulness?

- What questions does this story raise for you? Are there questions that remain unanswered?

Practice Questions

Note that 2- and 4-mark exam questions will refer to specific excerpts. The practice questions below have been written with the whole story in mind. They can be applied to a given excerpt or to the whole story.

National 5 Questions

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain how the writer makes it clear that we can/ cannot trust Bill Torvald as narrator. (4 marks)

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain what we learn about the character of Andrina. (4 marks)

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain how Bill's thoughts and/or feelings about his past are revealed. (4 marks)

By referring to this story and to at least one other from the short story collection, show how the theme of past wrongs is explored. (8 marks)

Higher Questions

By referring to **at least two** examples, analyse how the writer's use of language conveys Bill's feelings towards his past. (4 marks)

By referring to **at least two** examples, analyse how the writer's use of language conveys a clear impression of Bill and Andrina's personalities. (4 marks)

Analyse how the writer makes use of references to the natural world to develop characterisation. (4 marks)

By referring to this story and to at least one other from the short story collection, discuss how the writers explore the theme of relationships. (10 marks)

NB. Stories that Andrina' by George Mackay Brown might be compared with for the 8-mark question (National 5) or the 10-mark question (Higher) are:

- 'A Voice Spoke to Me at Night' by Helen McClory
- 'Things My Wife and I Found Hidden in Our House' by Kirsty Logan
- 'Death in a Nut' as told by Duncan Williamson

Connections / Comparisons

The visual below highlights connecting themes that may be useful to consider for the 8- or 10-mark exam question. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list – you may wish to explore beyond these categories and consider how different themes might overlap or contradict one another within and between texts.