

GCSE English Literature for AQA Specification A  
resource sheets

# **A Kestrel for a Knave**

## **Barry Hines**

Activities by Kath Seredyn

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The following pages consist of teacher's notes and classroom support sheets for *A Kestrel for a Knave* by Barry Hines. These resources are to help students who are studying *A Kestrel for a Knave* as part of the AQA GCSE English Literature specification. These pages can be freely downloaded and printed out as required. This material may be freely copied for institutional use. However, this material is copyright and under no circumstances can copies be offered for sale. The publishers gratefully acknowledge permission to reproduce copyright material.

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# Introduction

Barry Hines's novel *A Kestrel for a Knave* is one of the set prose texts for AQA GCSE English Literature Specification A. The examination is  $1\frac{3}{4}$  hours long and Section A is the Prose section, on which it is recommended that students spend 45 minutes. The examination is worth 70 per cent of the final assessment; coursework is worth 30 per cent.

## Aim and content

These sheets can be used in two main ways:

- 1 During the course as students prepare for essays on, for example, character or theme.
- 2 At the end of the course, to consolidate learning and for students to use individually as revision aids.

Most important is familiarity with the Assessment Objectives – the key to success!

The page references in these resources refer to the Heinemann New Windmills edition of *A Kestrel for a Knave*: ISBN 0 435 12460 9.

## Synopsis

*A Kestrel for a Knave* tells the story of a day in the life of Billy Casper. The story is written in the third person, but there is little doubt that we are encouraged to look through Billy's eyes. The setting is South Yorkshire in the 1960s – probably Barnsley – though Hines never names places. We know the town is in a mining area: Billy's brother Jud works down the pit, a fate that Billy wants to avoid, but the reader feels that inevitably he will not succeed. For boys like Billy, there was little else available.

The novel has several flashbacks that move away from the action of the day and fill in gaps from the past, such as how Billy came by Kes and trained her.

Billy lives with his feckless mother, Mrs Casper, and his brutal brother, Jud. It is not a loving home and Billy is not well provided for. He does, however, have his kestrel, Kes; she is the centre of his life and he dedicates all his time and efforts to her.

Billy's day starts with an unpleasant conversation with Jud and continues with his paper round for Mr Porter, who clearly believes Billy is inferior to the boys from the middle-class Firs Hill Estate. His day continues at school, where he is humiliated by both his form tutor, Mr Crossley, and the headmaster, Mr Gryce. After being caned for daydreaming in assembly, he goes to his English lesson with Mr Farthing. This lesson is one of the few positive times in his day: he is made to feel valued when he gives a talk to the class about his kestrel. At break, he is involved in a fight which is sorted out by Mr Farthing. Billy then goes to a PE lesson where the teacher, Mr Sugden, continues the humiliation because Billy has no kit and cannot play football.

At lunchtime, Billy goes to feed and fly Kes – a high point in his day. He is watched by Mr Farthing, who has gone to see him after listening to his talk in the English lesson. Billy was supposed to place a bet at the bookmaker's for Jud, but used the money to buy fish and chips instead, after finding out that the horses were unlikely to win. However, the horses do win, Jud finds out what has happened and he comes to school to find Billy. Billy hides from him, thus missing his interview with the Youth Employment Officer. Gryce discovers this and sends him along anyway. When the Officer asks Billy about his hobbies, Billy is reminded of a possible threat. What would Jud do, having failed to find him? Wanting revenge, Jud kills Billy's beloved Kes. When Billy returns home Kes is not there and his search for her is fruitless. He eventually finds her carcass in the bin and is desperately upset; he seeks support from his mother but receives none. At the end of his day – and the novel – he takes comfort in the derelict cinema where he remembers his father.

The novel ends as it started, with Billy in bed but with no hope and no Kes.

# The Assessment Objectives explained

The two Assessment Objectives which you will be tested on in the examination are:

## Assessment Objective 1: Respond to texts critically, sensitively and in detail ...

- You must know the text in detail and be able to support comments you make.
- Make sure you know what happens and the sequence of events in the story.
- Think about why Hines wrote the book, for example, what was he saying about the education of boys like Billy?
- Have your own ideas about aspects of the novel, such as character.
- Consider not only what Hines says but also what he suggests, for example about family life.
- Think about different features of the text, such as:
  - characters (make a list of categories, e.g. family)
  - do these characters represent anything?
  - relationships (for example Billy and Mr Farthing)
  - settings (home/ woods/ fields/ school)
  - characters' thoughts/ feelings
  - the author's thoughts/ feelings, for example his attitude to Billy.

## ... selecting appropriate ways to convey your response ...

- Focus on the task: select the key words and pay attention to any bullet points given. Everything you write should be relevant to the task.
- Make a plan – don't forget to practise making plans!
- Use literary terminology appropriately.
- Try to use a range of material from various points in the text.

## ... using textual evidence as appropriate.

- Quotes should be brief, accurate and relevant.
- Whenever you use a quote, comment on the author's methods, e.g. explain why he uses the simile 'like a brave little clown' to describe Billy after you have used the quote to support a point about how Billy reacts to Sugden's attitude to him.

## Assessment Objective 2: Explore how language, structure and forms contribute to the meanings of texts ...

- Look at the opening and the ending of the text.
- Are there any important moments in the text?
- Consider features such as metaphors, similes, and language choices; then explain how they affect the reader.
- Think about the significance of the title and the names of some of the characters.
- Think about the structure of the text, e.g. no chapters, use of flashbacks.
- Think about dialogue and descriptive passages: what do they show the reader?

## ... considering different approaches to texts and alternative interpretations.

- Think about how different readers may view the book, e.g. would a teacher and a student respond to it in the same way?
- Think about different ways of seeing a character, e.g. is Billy simply a victim?

## How to study a character

The key to studying a character is as follows:

- Know what the key episodes are in which the character is involved. If the character is involved all the time, as Billy is, pick episodes that typify that character and show a range of features, e.g. we learn very different things about Billy when he is flying Kes from when he is hitting Jud.
- Study what the character says and does and what others say about him/her. Remember to think about the character's relationships with other characters.
- Think about what Hines makes the reader feel about the character and how he achieves this. It may be what the character does, what s/he says or the language used to describe him/her.
- Does the character have a purpose in *A Kestrel for a Knave*? Jud, for example, is a wholly unpleasant person, but is Hines telling us something about the brutalising effect of working down the mines?

### An example: Mrs Casper

The main episodes in which she is involved are:

- the row after Billy's paper round (pages 14–18: 'The estate ... after me then ...')
- her lack of interest in the kestrel (pages 37–9: 'Mrs Casper came in ... crept under the lines')
- how she reacts after Kes's death (pages 169–72: 'His shout made ... into place with his fingers').

These episodes will be the start of your study of Mrs Casper.

Here, we will look at the second one and select part of it to consider in detail.

**Step 1** First of all, make a point:

Hines makes it clear that Mrs Casper likes to go out in the evenings and, as she gets ready, Billy is reading *A Falconer's Handbook*. At first she seems to take an interest in Billy, but it soon turns to a complete lack of interest. She asks him what he is going to do, what his book is about and what a kestrel is, but she is not interested in the answers. She suddenly realises she may be late.

**Step 2** Then use a couple of quotes as support:

- 'I say, what time is it?'
- 'I'm going to be late as usual.'

## How to study a character (*continued*)

**Step 3** Next, explain the ideas and take the opportunity to comment on Hines's language as you explore the presentation of Mrs Casper at this stage in the novel:

Billy tells her that he has 'cleaned t'bottom shed out' and 'built a little nesting box', but she ignores him as he tries to tell her what he has done. Billy and Mrs Casper are each having their own conversation, reflecting the distance between them. Hines stresses her untidiness as she tries to find her coat: she has to 'search through a pile of clothes' and is 'peeling them off' ('peeling' suggests just how many there are). She is then 'throwing them down', suggesting her careless attitude and her desire to find her coat and go. The reader feels that her parting words to Billy, 'And don't still be up when I come in' are not about the importance of his getting sleep but about her wanting him out of the way when she brings one of her men friends back.

### Activity 1

Choose another short extract from this episode and explore it in the same way as the example above. You could look at the details the author uses to describe the various stages of Mrs Casper getting ready, for example on page 37: 'Mrs Casper came in ...'.

### Activity 2

Now do the same with the episodes on pages 14–18 and 169–72.

### Activity 3

Complete a similar study for each of the other main characters:

- Jud
- Billy
- Mr Farthing
- Mr Crossley
- Mr Sugden
- Mr Gryce.

### Activity 4

Now complete a study for each of the minor characters, such as:

- Mr Porter
- the farmer
- the milkman
- the librarian.

## How to study a theme

### What are the main themes in the novel?

You need to know what the main themes of the novel are. Here are some ideas:

- education
- environment
- family life
- nature or Kes
- school or teachers
- respect.

### An example: family life

Consider what Hines tells us about family life. He does this in three main ways:

- through Billy's family life (this is the main way)
- through the family Billy sees when he is on his paper round
- through the 'tall story'.

The last two may not seem obvious and there may not appear to be much to say about them, but that's what makes them more interesting to use. They are also a good contrast with the way Billy's family life is presented.

You could study Billy's family life first of all: there are plenty of episodes to consider, for example:

- the opening of the novel when Jud gets up (pages 1–3)
- when Billy returns from his paper round (pages 14–18)
- when Jud comes home drunk (pages 39–42)
- after Billy finds Kes dead (pages 168–75)
- the ending in the derelict cinema – look for what Billy says about his dad (pages 181–2).

Here, we're going to study the section where Billy sees the family on his paper round. Re-read from 'At the side of the house ...' on page 11 to '... on a snake's back' on page 12, then read the commentary below.

### Commentary

The reader accompanies Billy on his paper round as he goes to Firs Hill, an estate where Mr Porter has already reminded Billy there are 'grand lads'. Hines uses this section to contrast Billy's family life with a very different one. The reader sees this other family through Billy's eyes and is aware of the contrast, but it is not made clear whether Billy is similarly aware or feels envious in any way. The house has a Bentley, which suggests the family's wealth, whereas Billy has only 'a packet of dried peas and half a bottle of vinegar' in his kitchen. 'Two little girls in school uniform' step out; they are obviously smart and well cared for, in contrast with Billy, who has no PE kit and whose jacket zip is broken.

## How to study a theme (*continued*)

### Commentary on the theme of family life (*continued*)

The mother is in her dressing gown, so we assume she does not have to work and will be at home for her family, and she waves to her children, unlike Mrs Casper who, when Billy leaves the house, is 'panting and jabbing her finger at him'. Hines makes effective use of detail as Billy observes the carpet, the radiator and the vase of fresh daffodils. We would take these for granted now, and they would not have been rare when the novel was written, but they are not part of Billy's life; indeed, in his 'tall story' he imagines that his own house has carpets and central heating. Perhaps the reader can sense Billy's longing as he 'pushed the letter box up and peeped through'. He hears 'the sound of running bath water' and a radio – sounds of a normal home in contrast with the constant shouting that goes on in Billy's house.

The extract ends with Hines observing, through Billy's eyes, the tyre imprints that are 'reminiscent of markings on a snake's back'. Perhaps Billy has retreated into the world of nature again, where he feels safe: something he rarely feels with his family.

### Activity 5

What can you learn from the passage referred to above (page 11 'At the side of the house ...' to page 12 '... on a snake's back.')? Tick the relevant boxes, then link the comments to the passage by adding your evidence in the spaces provided.

Short quotations are integrated into the writing.

---

Contrasts have been highlighted, showing a detailed knowledge of the text.

---

Reference to 'the reader' or 'we'.

---

There is a sense of the writer and his techniques.

---

Detailed analysis of a short passage.

---

Imaginative interpretation.

---

Exploration of ideas.

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## How to study a theme (*continued*)

### Activity 6

Select some other passages related to either the theme of family life, or another theme from the list on page 8, and apply the same approach.

Theme: \_\_\_\_\_

- Short quotations are integrated into the writing.

\_\_\_\_\_

- Contrasts have been highlighted, showing a detailed knowledge of the text.

\_\_\_\_\_

- Reference to 'the reader' or 'we'.

\_\_\_\_\_

- There is a sense of the writer and his techniques.

\_\_\_\_\_

- Detailed analysis of a short passage.

\_\_\_\_\_

- Imaginative interpretation.

\_\_\_\_\_

- Exploration of ideas.

\_\_\_\_\_

## Looking at language

When you comment on language, you are addressing Assessment Objective 2. You will probably do this as you go along in your response, although it is sometimes identified as a separate area if there are bullet points in the task you are working on. A bullet point in a task about Mr Farthing might say 'the ways the author presents Mr Farthing'; this is a reminder to you to mention these ways in your answer, it does not necessarily mean that you should do so separately. Look at the example below.

Hines presents Mr Farthing as a fair teacher who understands and encourages the boys. Whilst we see him skilfully teaching them in the English lesson, we also see a no-nonsense and aggressive side to him in the playground when he deals with MacDowall: 'He lifted MacDowall off Billy and shook him like a terrier shakes a rat.'

You could then go on to analyse the language used here:

- describe the effect of the verb 'lifted'
- say how the simile works.

**Some features of language for you to consider:**

- Descriptive writing: mainly evident in the descriptions of woods and fields, but also in evidence elsewhere, e.g. features of Billy's home and school, the cinema.
- Similes and metaphors.
- Dialogue – a powerful tool in revealing character.
- Careful choice of words/ phrases that capture a moment precisely.

## Looking at language (*continued*)

### Activity 7

The questions in this activity are about Hines's craft in choosing language. If you can analyse just a couple of examples in detail in your essay, then you will be doing well.

Say what effects the author achieves in the following examples:

- 1 '... round the outskirts other skirmishes were developing, forming sideshows to the main attraction.' (a metaphor describing the boys' behaviour whilst Billy and MacDowall fight – page 84).
- 2 'like a brave little clown' (a simile describing Billy as he puts on the shorts given to him by Mr Sugden – page 99).
- 3 the description of the shed where Billy keeps Kes (page 18) 'In front ... with clean laths'. What is the effect of 'neatly', 'whitewashed', 'freshly', 'clean'?
- 4 'Just came out from under a stone' – Mr Crossley's words to Billy on page 46. What does this statement reveal about Mr Crossley's character?
- 5 'like a bulldog up on its hind legs' (a simile describing Mr Gryce – page 47).
- 6 On page 1 Hines writes that Jud 'snorted' and Billy 'whimpered'.
- 7 'A cushion of mist ... like the finger of a clock' (page 22). Re-read this passage and select descriptive details from it which you consider to be effective.
- 8 The abusive language used by Jud when addressing Billy.
- 9 Mr Farthing's dialogue with Billy (pages 127–35) – lots to look for here – e.g. he refers to him as an 'expert' and a 'falconer'.

### An example of detailed language analysis

Below is a sample piece of writing about Billy's desperate search for Kes towards the end of the novel (pages 160–7).

The reader senses Billy's desperation as he searches in vain for Kes and seems unable to make any progress:

'He blundered on, shouting into the darkness, stumbling and falling on all fours like a tired animal, then scrambling up and on again.'

Here, Hines seems to suggest that as Billy tries to move, even the woods, where he normally feels safe, are working against him. The verbs 'blundered', 'stumbling', 'falling' and 'scrambling' all suggest awkward and difficult movements and reflect Billy's frustration. He shouts into 'the darkness' where nothing and no one is likely to hear. The image of him 'on all fours' and the simile 'like a tired animal' make him seem a pitiful part of the countryside; they also echo other references in the text when Billy is likened to an animal, such as in the football match when he was 'imitating chimp sounds'. However, although the reader was invited to laugh at that, here we can only sympathise.

## Looking at structure

If you comment on structure you are addressing Assessment Objective 2. Structure is how a novel is 'built', shaped or put together; it's what a writer 'hangs' ideas on. It is not difficult to comment on structure in *A Kestrel for a Knave*. Below are some points you could consider and explore.

- The novel covers one day of Billy's life and the reader accompanies him through that day.
- There are flashbacks where the author takes us out of the timeline of the story and relates events that are relevant to the main storyline. It is interesting that we seem to see Billy gain and lose the kestrel in the same day because of the flashbacks. You must know where the flashbacks are: make a list of the different sections of the novel and, briefly, what happens in them.
- There are no chapters in the novel, so one event goes naturally into another, in the same way that a normal day progresses.
- The beginning and the end are important. Hines quickly establishes what Billy's life is like in the opening pages and prepares us for what is to come. The ending is an emotional – perhaps inevitable – conclusion to Billy's day. It is interesting to note that Billy starts and ends the novel in bed – what effect do you think this has?
- Due to the rapid progression of events, the reader is made aware of the contrasts in Billy's day – from the brutality and neglect of his home, to the mixed experiences of school, to the sheer joy he gains from Kes. Find and write about some examples of each of these different aspects of his day.

### Activity 8

- 1 What is gained from the use of flashbacks in the novel?
- 2 How does the fact that the novel covers one day in Billy's life affect our view of him?

# Preparing for the examination

In your English Literature examination, whether you are entered for the Higher or the Foundation Tier, you will be expected to write an essay in 45 minutes and your essay will be marked out of 27.

## Annotation

You cannot annotate your copy of the text, so it is very important that you know the text well. The most obvious way you can help yourself is by reading the book as many times as possible. Each time you do so, it may be a good idea to focus on a particular theme (such as education), character (such as Mrs Casper), or an aspect of Hines's craft (such as his descriptive writing). You could take some notes as you go along. Another thing you could do as you are re-reading is note where sections of the novel begin and end and write down quotes that may be useful to you. You could chart these quotes: put together all the quotes that tell the reader something about Mrs Casper, for example. Remember: in the examination, you will not have time to search through the novel for a particular quote.

## Practice

You must practise writing examination essays, some of which must be done under examination conditions (see the exam practice questions on page 14 in these sheets).

## Revision

Try to use a variety of revision methods, as you may 'switch off' if you spend a long time writing or reading page after page of notes. Other interesting activities include making mind maps (for example on Jud – what he says, what he does and how the author presents him), spider diagrams (for example to plan the paragraphs of an essay) or charts (for example a chart of the good and bad influences in Billy's life).

## What is the examiner looking for?

Above all, you must know exactly what the examiner is looking for. After all, you wouldn't start to play a sport if you didn't know the rules of the game! Understanding what the examiner expects from you is like knowing the rules of the game. It's up to you to learn them and, of course, practise them!

This final point is very important, and you should pay particular attention to the exam practice questions on page 14.

## Exam practice questions

### Foundation Tier questions

In the Foundation Tier, each question will have bullet points. For example:

- 1 Do you feel sorry for Billy? Write about:
  - What makes you feel sorry for Billy.
  - What makes you not feel sorry for Billy.
  - How Hines makes you feel by the ways he writes.
- 2 Write about two of Billy's relationships in *A Kestrel for a Knave*.

Choose from:

- Billy and Mrs Casper
- Billy and Mr Sugden
- Billy and Mr Farthing.

Write about:

- What each relationship is like.
- How Hines presents each relationship.

### Higher Tier questions

In the Higher Tier, usually one of the questions will have bullet points and the other won't. For example:

- 1 How does Hines present Billy as a victim and as a fighter?
- 2 Do you think *A Kestrel for a Knave* is a depressing novel, or does it offer any hope? Write about:
  - What you think is depressing in the novel.
  - What you think is hopeful in the novel.
  - How Hines makes you feel by the ways he writes.

### Guidance

- There are three main types of question: character-based, theme-based and a question with an extract from the novel as a stimulus.
- The questions will always direct you to the Assessment Objectives (see page 5). In particular, Assessment Objective 2 is addressed by words like **how**, **methods**, **presents**, **the ways he writes**, so it follows that if you answer the question precisely, then you will address both Assessment Objectives.

## Sample planning for a Foundation question

Below is a sample plan for a response to Foundation question 2 on page 14, **Write about two of Billy's relationships in *A Kestrel for a Knave*.**

**Introduction:** a brief response to each relationship; short quote; comment.

**Main part of response:**

Billy and Mrs Casper

- she does not provide for Billy
- she does not care about his school life
- she does not protect him from Jud
- she shows no interest in Kes
- Billy accepts what she's like.

Billy and Mr Farthing

- he encourages Billy
- he listens to him and talks to him
- he learns from him
- he shows a genuine interest
- Billy opens up/ feels confident with him.

Remember the author's methods, for example his use of dialogue.

**Conclusion:** a quick comparison of the two relationships/importance of Billy.