

Lionheart A-Level English Literature Transition Task 1

Task instructions

As part of your induction to A-Level Literature at Beauchamp College, Beauchamp City Sixth Form, The Castle Rock School or Cedars Academy you will complete an Unseen Crime task. The lens through which you will look at this extract is **crime writing**. You should read the extract very carefully several times and then answer the questions that follow. There is information in the box below which is designed to help you understand the extract. You should also read this carefully. This is a learning opportunity for you to read and think like an A-level Literature student, not a test. Some of you will no doubt struggle with these questions but nonetheless go on to do extremely well when you start in sixth form.

The Mercies by Kiran Millwood Hargrave

The Mercies is a novel by Kiren Millwood Hargrave published in 2020 but set in the early 1600s on the remote Norwegian island of Vardø. The novel is inspired by real life events when a Christmas Eve storm blew up while all the island men were out fishing. None survived, and so for months the island's women managed the male roles of fishing, building, reindeer herding and butchery. In 1618, King Christian IV introduced laws against witchcraft modelled on those of James VI in Scotland. His primary target was the Sámi people of the far north, but hundreds of other Norwegian women were also executed. The women of Vardø immediately fell under suspicion due to their carrying out of male roles, connection to the indigenous Sámi people and the natural disaster which killed all their men (later believed to be the work of witchcraft), and in the novel Absalom Cornet - a Scottish commissioner and type of witch-hunter - is sent to the island with his wife to investigate and prosecute.

In the extract, Absalom's wife Ursula is disturbed by the sound of cries and discovers her husband arresting one of her island friends, Fru Olufsdatter for witchcraft. She has been accused by Sigfrid and Toril, two of the women on the island who have welcomed the arrival of the witch-hunters. Though Ursa is married to Absalom, her loyalty and sympathy lies with Maren, one of the women on the island with whom she has been growing ever closer. Maren's sister-in-law, Diinna is Sámi.

Ursa wakes to an empty house, a dirty cup on the table and shudders when she thinks of him watching her as she slept.

She climbs from the bed and pours water still hot from the fire into her washbowl, scrubs at herself with a rag, until she is as sure as she can be that she is free of him. She begins to dress, fast in the cold room, thinking to walk to Maren's, to check that Diinna has taken her words to heart, but there is a cry from outside, sounding very close by, which spurs her into action.

The cry comes again, and outside it is louder but she is less certain of its source. Someone comes running past her - holding her skirts clear of her legs. She is running towards Maren's house, and for a moment Ursa begins to follow her. But a loud sob, imploring, comes from behind.

Fru Olufsdatter's door is wide open on its hinges and slapping at the wall. From this angle Ursa can see nothing within, but as she watches, a man she doesn't recognize, slight and tall, comes to the

doorway and closes it. A semicircle of women stand about outside. She is too far off to note their expressions, but several have their hands at their mouths.

She sees other faces at other thresholds, other shapes moving between houses like animals between trees towards the sound. She wants to go back inside, makes for the door. Fear grips her at the backs of the knees, loosens her legs, and for a moment she must cling on to the latch.

The women's attention breaks from the house as she approaches. Several scatter, faces downturned, but Toril walks towards her, grips her upper arms painfully, delight plain on her thin face.

'He has acted, at last! Mistress Cornet, it is a blessed day indeed.'

Ursa shrugs her off. 'Acted? What is happening?'

'Surely he told you?' The woman doesn't even bother to hide her smile. 'Mistress Cornet, he is in there now, with Fru Olufsdatter. He is arresting her.'

Her heartbeat becomes painful. 'Arresting her? What is her crime?'

'We do not know exactly,' Sigfrid says, coming to stand beside Toril. She is paler, less triumphant, but her voice is breathless with exhilaration. 'But no doubt her crimes are numerous. Their workings are apparent once you spot them.'

Toril squeezes Sigfrid's shoulder. 'We will be safer now, my friend.'

Ursa looks to the other women. She knows none of them well-one, Gerda, comes to Wednesday meets but doesn't speak much. The others must be the kirke¹-women, as Maren named them.

The door is thrown open, and Fru Olufsdatter comes out, bound at her wrists with the thin stranger beside her, a stripe of blood upon her white apron though she looks unhurt. Absalom walks close behind, his sheaf of papers tucked to his chest. His face is grave, mouth twitching with excitement. He spots Ursa - she sees his sharp intake of breath - but doesn't speak to her, only brushes past.

'Husband,' she says. 'Absalom. Where are you taking her?'

'To Vardohus.' He speaks not only to her but lets the words ring out. 'To the witches' hole.'

'She is no witch,' says Ursa, desperate, remembering the squalid building where the Lapps were kept. 'I have been often to her house, prayed there often-'

'I knew her for it,' says Toril, a sheen on her upper lip. She is rank with agitation; Ursa can smell it in her sweat. 'Witchcraft. Her fine house - how would she keep it so well alone, other than with help from familiars? And the poppets².'

'And the marks upon my arm,' says Sigfrid. 'Twelve small black holes, like a beast's bite marks.'

Ursa blinks at her. She sounds mad. But Absalom nods gravely at them, places a hand upon each of them as though in benediction.

¹ Kirke is another word for Church

² a type of pagan symbol of mourning associated with the indigenous Sámi people

'You will be called for testimony,' he says. He follows as Fru Olufsdatter is pulled away. She is weeping, bound hands scrabbling at her face. Ursa can't bring herself to go to her. Instead she rounds on Toril and Sigfrid.

'What are these marks? Show me.'

'It isn't decent,' says the woman, flushing.

'God damns a liar, Fru Jonsdatter.'

'She is no liar,' says Toril.

'Was it you who told my husband of the poppets? They were gestures of remembrance, nothing more.'

'They were poppets,' says Toril. 'We all saw them for what they were.' The other women nod. 'She got them from that Lapp³. She is next, no doubt.'

Ursa runs, skirts pulled over her knees. Maren's door is open too and for a terrible moment she thinks she is too late, her husband's men already inside, but as she calls for her Maren emerges. The relief stabs at her side like a stitch and she grasps at her ribs.

'You know?'

'Yes.'

'You must warn Diinna. I thought she had time to make amends, I thought-'

'She's gone.' Maren says this low, so only Ursa can hear. 'Gone?'

Maren holds her finger to her lips. 'In the night. They will not catch her now.'

Ursa sways, her breath still difficult, and Maren steadies her with a hand beneath her elbow. Her words and touch are so welcome Ursa wants to catch up her hand and kiss it.

- 1) How are the characters presented in this extract?
- 2) What setting is established in this extract?
- 3) Can you identify any elements of crime? (Criminals, victims, crimes, punishments...?)
- 4) Provide a summary of what happens in the extract.