

# Matthew and Sheila

## a novel by Robin Jenkins

*Suggestions for learning and teaching Scottish literature and language*  
John Hodgart, P.T. English, Garnock Academy

While *The Cone Gatherers* is a popular text at Higher level, many of Jenkins's other novels would interest students from S4 onwards, such as *The Changeling*, *Just Duffy* or *The Thistle and the Grail*. Whether set in foreign lands or firmly rooted in Scotland, Jenkins's fiction deals with universal conflicts between good and evil and is rich in moral dilemmas, contradictions and irony, often presenting would-be saints or justified sinners in a very ambivalent manner. *Matthew and Sheila*, a disturbing moral tale in the tradition of Hogg and Stevenson, is certainly one of these.

Matthew Sowglass is a sensitive and serious nine-year-old who believes that he is one of 'the Chosen', thanks to his stern grandfather's Calvinistic teachings, and sets out to test the theory of 'divine immunity' after the death of his loving mother and abandonment by his artistic father. Unfortunately his first attempt at being wicked brings Sheila Burnside into his life. At first she seems like a guardian angel, but she may well be the Devil in disguise, a Jekyll and Hyde figure who appears angelic to everyone else but thoroughly evil to Matthew. Is she telling the truth about the various murders she claims to have committed? Or is she simply a disturbed and damaged child, spinning her own lies and fantasies to torment and finally tempt Matthew into evil? While the novel examines the damage adults do to children and the possibly fatal consequences, *Matthew and Sheila* leaves us in the dark with many unanswered questions, offering us either a psychological explanation or possibly a supernatural one. We are left to make up our own minds about the truth of what has happened and about the source of evil. Jenkins's novel is rich in irony, contradictions and ambivalence, exploring themes of religious fanaticism, hypocrisy, appearances and reality, lies and truth, love and hate, the conflict of good and evil and many other issues that should interest teenagers from around S4 onwards. The language and style are simple but the characters and issues aren't: arguably the novel possesses the deceptive simplicity of a fairy-tale or fable, with the power to haunt and trouble us long after we have put it down. It would also be a good choice for a Personal Study or AH Dissertation, especially in comparison with some of the novels mentioned above like *The Changeling* or *Just Duffy*.

The following questions and essay guide are intended for class study from S4 C/G onwards. The questions should be used selectively and the activities varied to allow for individual, group or whole class discussion or written answers, e.g. group or individual responsibility for investigating and preparing answers to different sections or questions to start or lead class discussion, and comparison with other responses. There is some differentiation in the level of difficulty in each section and generally the level of complexity increases throughout.

**RANGE**

- S4–S6. C/G, Higher Grade and Advanced Higher Grade

**KEY TEXT**

- *Matthew and Sheila*, Robin Jenkins (Polygon, 1998)

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## PART ONE

### Chapter 1

Explain the concept of 'the Chosen' which Matthew has been taught by his grandfather, and how Matthew's view of angels reveals an important difference between them.

- (a) Why has Matthew decided that he is one of 'those favourites' but his grandfather isn't? What is ironic about this?  
(b) Does his grandfather sound like a good Christian? Why?
- (a) How does Matthew test his belief about being one of the chosen, and what does he conclude from it?  
(b) He keeps referring to this throughout the novel. What does this suggest to us about him?
- What sort of upbringing have his mother's family had and what do you think of this?
- Look at the description of the setting on p3. Comment on the word choice and say how appropriate or ironic this description is, bearing in mind what his grandfather has just taught him.
- Look up or research the following words or expressions: 'divine indemnity' (p4, paragraph 3), 'religious fundamentalism', Calvinism, predestination, 'the Elect', 'Wee Frees' (familiar name for Free Presbyterian Church which is very strong in North Uist, Harris and Lewis), Sabbatarianism, diabolical (foot p12).

### Chapters 2–5

- (a) Why has Matthew's grandfather cursed his mother and why does he think Matthew is 'accursed from conception'?  
(b) What is his mother's opinion of the grandfather's beliefs, especially telling her son it would have been better if he'd never been born?  
(c) What do you think of his beliefs and attitude?
- How does Matthew react to her explanation and her sad news? What does this reveal about him?
- How are his cousins disappointed at the end of chapter three, and why is Mathew smiling both at the beginning and end of the chapter?
- What family tensions come to the surface with his mother's death? Who appears to care most for her and what does this tell us about them?  
(a) How is Hugh Sowglass affected by his wife's death? What does his decision to go away reveal about him?  
(b) What is Mrs Macdonald's opinion of him? Do you agree with her?

### Chapter 6

- (a) How does Matthew explain his special condition to Mrs Macdonald? What is her opinion of this and why?  
(b) How does this conversation make her feel anxious about Matthew?

- (a) What do we learn about Mrs Macdonald's own life in this chapter?  
(b) What do we learn about her attitude to other people in the town, especially Davy Moore's family, and what does this show about her?
- Why does Matthew want to make friends with Davy Moore? What does this reveal about Matthew?
- Why is his compass important to Matthew and why doesn't he want to ask for it back from Davy?

## PART TWO

### Chapters 1–2

- (a) We are told that no-one believed Davy Moore. What comment does this make about the kind of school or society it is part of?  
(b) Do you think your school is like this in any way? Why?
- (a) Why does Matthew believe Sheila is an agent from God? What does this incident reveal about both of them?  
(b) How is the situation settled 'in a way that only God could have achieved'? (p49)
- (a) How does Matthew's view of her change when Sheila suddenly appears beside him on the way home? What does she do or say in this chapter that appears to confirm this view?  
(b) Matthew wonders 'what had caused her to be like this.' (p53) What does his answer reveal about him?
- (a) Why does he feel trapped or powerless to do anything about her, and why does he feel 'it was another instance of evil winning'? (p60)  
(b) How would you deal with someone like Sheila Burnside?

### Chapters 3–4

- While he is in the church, what doubts does Matthew have about being chosen and what impression does he get of Sheila's father after the service? (p61–2)
- What do you think of Mrs Macdonald's answer to Matthew's question about believing in the Devil? How would you answer her question about 'who puts the badness in folks' minds'?
- Why does Mrs Macdonald believe Matthew at the end of chapter 3? How important do you think these qualities are to your understanding of Matthew's character and why?
- How are the two sides of Sheila shown in chapter 4 and why does she call Matthew a hypocrite? (p69)
- Why can't Matthew help feeling doubtful about her, and why is he also afraid? (pp71–2)

### Chapters 5–8

1. What impact does Davy Moore's death have on the school? What do you think of the way his school handles the situation? How do you think this would be handled in your school today and would the pupils' behaviour be any different? (chapters 5 and 8)
2. Why do you think he describe Lunderston as 'splendid but also sinister'? (p77)
3. (a) What suspicions does Matthew have, and why? How are these confirmed when he visits Sheila?  
(b) If she really did kill Davy, why do you think she would have done this?
4. (a) Why doesn't he want to talk about Sheila and why does Mrs Macdonald 'almost weep'? (pp81–2)  
(b) What is Mrs Macdonald's opinion of Hugh Sowglass (p81) and why does she feel 'great anxiety' at the end of this chapter?
5. (a) How does Sheila's phone call to Mrs Macdonald contrast with her call to Matthew? What do you think she is playing at? (p80–82)  
(b) Why is Matthew no longer sure that angels are 'beneficent'?

### Chapters 9–12

1. What is odd or unexpected about both Davy Moore's and Miss Johnston's funerals? (pp87–8)
2. What does Mrs Moore's phone call tell us about both Matthew and Mrs Macdonald? (pp88–89) What impression does the author give us of Davy's parents at the funeral (chapter 11) and later in chapter 12?
3. Why do you think Sheila says what she does in chapter 10? Why is it such a short chapter?
4. (a) What is 'utterly ridiculous', and what is the 'awful possibility' that creeps into Matthew's mind? (p94)  
(b) Do you think she is telling 'ridiculous lies'? What has the author done to make you feel this?
5. Who are the suspects of the murder and what does this tell us about the local police?
6. Vocabulary check: celestial fold, eulogy, humbug (foot p87), sentimental, romantic (foot p89), derision, sceptical, gait (p95), exonerated, kenspeckle, curmudgeon, irredeemable, misanthropy, antipathy, alibi (p96).

### Chapters 13–14

1. How does Sheila's behaviour support the idea that she is like the Devil? Why does she tell Matthew that 'you've got an awful lot to learn'? (p99)
2. How are Matthew's feelings about Sheila 'complicated' and how does her unexpected behaviour bring about a change in his feelings by the end of chapter 13?
3. From the evidence given on p100, do you think the button is from Davy's coat? Why?
4. (a) What is the apparent reason and the real reasons for Matthew wanting to go to Uist? (pp100–104)  
(b) Why is his compass so important to him and what do you think it is meant to symbolise? (p99)

5. (a) What is the difference between the romances Mrs Macdonald reads and 'real life' (pp106–7)? Which is more likely to apply to Matthew's situation and why?  
(b) Why does Mrs Macdonald believe in 'reconciliations' (p106) and how does this turn out to be an important theme on his visit to Uist?
6. Why does Mrs Macdonald think that Matthew is 'too forgiving'? How does this concern add to her earlier concerns and so help give an insight into his character? (check pp98 and 65 again)

### Chapters 15–16

1. How does Jenkins suggest that Uist is a very close-knit community?
2. (a) How would you describe his aunt's manner and attitude towards him when he first arrives?  
(b) How does he feel at the end of chapter 15 and how do word choices and sentence structure show this?
3. Matthew wants to feel close to his mother on Uist. How does he try to do this, and how does Jenkins make us strongly aware of human transience and mortality, via word choice and imagery? (especially pp111–2)
4. How would you describe Aunt Fiona's attitude towards his father, and what does Matthew find funny?
5. What astonishing change does he suddenly see in his aunt and how does he feel about this? (p114)

### Chapters 17–18

1. What surprising change does Matthew find in his grandfather's appearance and why? (p117)
2. Why do you think he wanted to 'speak to the boy' and how is this rather ironic?
3. How does Mrs Macdonald's attitude to others contrast with his grandfather's? Whose example does Matthew follow in dealing with Aunt Fiona? How is this shown? (pp119–12)
4. At the end of the funeral, Aunt Fiona asks what he wants. In your opinion, what does Matthew want?

### Chapters 19–20

1. (a) What impression are we given of Matthew's other aunts and uncles?  
(b) What is their solution to the problem of Fiona and why doesn't this succeed?
2. Why does Matthew decide to stay on with Aunt Fiona and what do his relatives think of this?
3. How are his feelings changing towards his aunt? What point is Jenkins trying to make by showing this?
4. What is surprising about his aunt's opinion of his mother? What does this reveal about the two women? (pp130–1)
5. Why is Uist 'sacred' to Matthew, and how are we reminded that evil can be found anywhere? (pp131–2)

### Chapters 21–3

1. How does the author make use of plot devices like surprise, shock or even prediction in chapter 21?
2. Why does Matthew think Mr Burnside's death (or murder) doesn't make sense? (p135)
3. What does his aunt mean 'God is not mocked', and why does he think 'God was easily deceived'? (p136)
4. (a) Do you think Sheila is telling the truth about murdering her father? Why?  
(b) How does she try to make Matthew feel implicated in the crime? (p138)
5. Why does he feel that he will 'have to suffer alone ... all his life' and what is he now afraid of? (p139)
6. Chapter 23 is like a short summary of how things have changed during his trip. How is this shown?

### Chapters 24–6

1. (a) Why does Matthew again feel that Sheila is 'an agent of the Devil' and how does her behaviour in chapter 24 or 25 support or refute his view?  
(b) What do we learn about Sheila that might provide another explanation for her behaviour? Why?
2. (a) How is the decision made about where Sheila should stay? What light does it shed on Matthew, Sheila and Mrs Macdonald's characters?  
(b) Why might the relatives be 'greatly relieved'? (pp146–7)
3. Why does he 'not trust God so much now', and how does he try to reassure himself? (pp148–9)
4. What might Sheila's offer at the end of chapter 25 lead us to expect or predict might happen later?
5. What is the Lunderston view of Matthew and Sheila and how is his attitude towards her changing? (chapter 26)
6. Comment on the effectiveness of the last sentence of chapter 26. (p153)

### Chapters 27–30

1. (a) What effect does Hugh Sowglass's postcard have on Sheila? Why do you think we are told Mrs Macdonald would remember Sheila's look 'with horror all her life'? (p155)  
(b) How does her opinion of Sheila alter in this section and why? (e.g. p161)  
(c) Why is the last paragraph of chapter 28 ironic and what does it tell us about Mrs Macdonald? (p159)
2. (a) Which words convey how Matthew is feeling at the news of his father's return, and when his taxi arrives, and how do they do this? (pp157 and 171)  
(b) Why is Mrs Macdonald so concerned or anxious about him? (e.g. pp158 and 170)  
(c) How difficult is this period for Matthew and what makes it worse for him?
3. (a) By examining several things Sheila says in this section (e.g. pp156, 159, 160–3) do you think she is really trying to warn Matthew or just torment him? Why?  
(b) Do you think she is right about anything? Why? What does this show about her?

4. Compare how Sheila responds to Matthew's news with how both Mrs Macdonald and his Aunt Fiona respond. (e.g. p158 and 166) What is revealed through this contrast?
5. (a) What might Matthew expect from his father's 'big surprise' and what do you think of his father for telling him this?  
(b) How does Mrs Macdonald intend to deal with Hugh Sowglass and what do you think of her intentions? (p170)
6. Why do you think Jenkins takes four chapters between the news that Sowglass will be returning home and his actual arrival? (chapters 27–30)

### Chapters 31 – 33

1. (a) How does Matthew react to his father's 'surprise' and which words highlight this? (p172)  
(b) What further shocks await him? What state of mind is he now in and why?
2. (a) Why do you think Jenkins chose to view Sowglass's return through Mrs Macdonald's eyes and not Matthew's? (p171–3)  
(b) What do you think of the way she handles the situation?
3. (a) What is Mrs Macdonald's opinion of Hugh Sowglass and why? Do you agree with her?  
(b) What is Sheila's opinion of Hugh Sowglass and why? Do you agree with her?  
(c) How does Sheila begin to let her mask slip and why? (pp174–5)
4. (a) What is Sowglass's opinion of Matthew, Mrs Macdonald, Sheila and his own wife, and what does this reveal about him? (chapter 31)  
(b) Are we likely to share or sympathise with his views on the others? Why?
5. Explain how Jenkins makes effective use of contrasting viewpoints in this chapter and what themes or ideas this helps to develop.
6. (a) What changes in Matthew highlight the effect his father's 'surprise' has on him?  
(b) How does his relationship with Sheila change and why? (pp175, 183–7)  
(c) How is this used to create fear, tension or suspense? (chapters 32–3 onwards)  
(d) What does Sheila make of his belief about 'the Elect'? Do you agree with her?
7. In what way is this section perhaps the most dramatic part of the story and why?

### Chapters 34 – 41

1. How does Matthew justify what he plans? What does this show about his state of mind? (pp184–5, 195)
2. (a) How are Sheila's contradictory or two-faced sides revealed in Uist?  
(b) How do Matthew's doubts about her now return to him and why? (pp192, 194, 196–8, 200–8)
3. (a) What do the islanders think of Sheila, and what does her concert performance highlight? (chapters 38–9)  
(b) What does Matthew think about her at the concert? What is he still puzzled about?  
(c) In what way does Miss McDougall show great insight in her comments about Sheila? (pp215–6)
4. (a) How does Aunt Fiona surprise Matthew and how does his relationship with her develop?  
(b) What theme does this help to illustrate? (pp194, 199, 217–8)
5. In what way are both Aunt Fiona and Mrs Macdonald positive influences on Matthew, and how important is his relationship with both?
6. (a) Why does Matthew go along with Sheila's ritual and what does this show about her influence over him?  
(b) Why does he now feel that she is one of 'the Chosen'? (p220)  
(c) In what ways is she acting like a Devil-figure here? (chapter 40)
7. (a) How do Matthew and Sheila react differently to Mrs Macdonald's phone call and why?  
(b) What does Matthew think about her after this and why? (pp226–7)
8. How effectively does the author make use of tension, fear, drama and suspense in chapters 40–41?

### The Epilogue

1. (a) Why do you think the author has chosen to set the final chapter twenty years later?  
(b) How effective do you find his use of the Lunderston ladies' viewpoint in the epilogue?
2. (a) What effect is created by the news about Davy Moore, Conchita and the baby, and what does all this make us reconsider?  
(b) In what ways has the author perhaps been playing games with us, by surprising or shocking us once again or by letting us down by leaving us in the dark about things we want to know about?
3. (a) What interests and puzzles the gossips about Matthew and Sheila?  
(b) What is their view of Matthew Sowglass and what is your final impression of him?  
(c) How do you think he would have reacted to his stepmother's death and how do you think this would have affected the rest of his life?
4. Do you think the ending is effective or not? Why? Do you perhaps feel it is disappointing and an anti-climax? Or is he deliberately avoiding a neat ending, thus leaving us to make up our own minds – reminding us that we shouldn't judge people by appearances and that some mysteries will always remain in the dark, unanswered?
5. Vocabulary check and quiz: in pairs or groups take it in turns to ask questions about word meanings from the epilogue and possibly other chapters.

### CREATIVE WRITING SUGGESTIONS

1. Write Matthew's and/or Sheila's diary, covering some important events in the story or years later.
2. Script a scene between Matthew and Sheila after the events of chapter 41 or after the phone call.
3. Continue the story after chapter 41, with a final chapter dealing with Conchita's death, etc.
4. Reflect on how deceptive appearances can be or on the dangers of being too certain or self-righteous.
5. Write a poem about devils or angels you know, or about a person or place very special to you.
6. If you had three wishes that would make a big difference to you, what would they be? (**NOT** 'money'.)

### CRITICAL ESSAY QUESTIONS – CHOOSE ONE

1. This is an unusual and disturbing novel. How far do you agree?
2. This is a deceptively simple novel. Is this an accurate description?
3. The plot of the novel keeps us guessing and puzzled until the very end and leaves us with many important questions unanswered. Do you agree with this assessment of the book?
4. The characters in this novel are fascinating in several ways: the relationship between the two main characters; a strange, mysterious and ambiguous female character; the contrast between a good and evil character, or between a caring, kindly character and a narrow-minded, judgemental or a selfless and selfish character. Select at least two of these aspects and discuss how important they are in the novel.
5. This novel leaves us with much to think about. What issues or themes has the novel made you think about?

### CRITICAL ESSAY GUIDE

You could answer your question using the main sections below or you could break your argument into several different aspects, such as arguments for/view you agree with, points against/disagree with, points you are unsure or unconvinced about, etc. Also remember the importance of backing up your points with evidence and analysis throughout your essay i.e. how you know something and how you can show it. Remember in your **introduction** to give title, author, type of text, brief explanation and statement of your aims and approaches to your question.

#### Plot

You will need to explain briefly who the main character is, the difficulties he faces and his relationship with Sheila Burnside, but don't delve into character too much here. Try to focus on the main storyline and what it revolves round, e.g. an examination of the idea that some people are 'chosen' and have 'divine indemnity', and how the story progresses by a series of key steps or turning points, testing Matthew's belief towards a dramatic climax and an unexpected ending. Keep in mind how the author builds up expectations, keeps us in suspense, shocks or surprises us and maintains a sense of mystery or uncertainty right to the end. Refer to examples such as his mother's death; his father's departure; Sheila's claims to murder and Matthew's fear of her; his escape to Uist; the return of his father; Matthew's involvement in a supernatural ritual at the climax of the novel; and the further surprises in the epilogue.

#### Narrative Structure and Viewpoint

The novel is organised into three main sections. The first part shows how Matthew comes to believe he is 'chosen' and the effect of his mother's death and father's departure when he is only nine. The second and main body of the story, by far the longest section, covers a period of over three years: focusing on his relationship with Sheila Burnside; testing the theory about being 'chosen'; revealing how Matthew suffers in his father's absence; his father's return when Matthew is about thirteen; and the final dramatic climax. Lastly there is the short epilogue which suddenly jumps forward twenty years and gives us the town gossips' viewpoint on the life of Matthew Sowglass.

How effective do you find this three-part structure, of foundation, gradual development of main conflict towards a climax, and final short epilogue? Why do you think Jenkins chose to structure the storyline in this way? What does it make the reader concentrate on most and how does it make the plot more or less effective, powerful, enjoyable, surprising or disappointing? Do you think the ending is effective or not and why?

A key element in telling the story is Jenkins's use of a third-person narrative viewpoint. Much of the focus is on Matthew, allowing us to know what he is thinking and feeling. Why does he focus mainly on Matthew and do you find it a sympathetic presentation? At the same time, because it is a third-person viewpoint, we can see him from the outside, as he can't see himself. Why do you think the author chose this viewpoint and what is he trying to make us aware of? (e.g. how others see him, or to reveal certain things about Matthew.)

Jenkins also keeps shifting the perspective to include other main characters, so that we see people and events often from several points of view – mainly Mrs Macdonald's, but also his father's, his aunt's, other family members and other people in the town. What is gained by frequently shifting the narrative viewpoint and voice like this? *N.B.*: there is one crucial exception: we hear or see very little from Sheila's point of view, other than what Matthew sees or what we hear via dialogue. In some ways we are deliberately left in the dark about her. What is the main advantage of this shifting or contrasting of viewpoints and why doesn't he allow us to see things through Sheila's eyes very much? How is Sheila's voice and opinion mainly presented and how effective is this?

#### Character – Matthew and Sheila

Firstly think about why Jenkins chose the title he did. What does it lead us to expect? (e.g. a children's adventure story? Why?) How well does it sum up the whole book? Is it a reliable guide to what it is really all about or is it deceptively simple? Can you think of any reason why he chose the names of his characters, especially Matthew and Sheila? Check out their meaning under Christian or First names in a dictionary, especially Matthew, which has very clear religious significance. What about Sowglass and Burnside? Do Matthew and his father have any qualities in common with glass and is there a play on words with 'sow' and 'so'? Could the Gaelic 'glas', meaning green or grey, be relevant? Remember Sheila's various devil features, such as having hot hands and often wearing red. Does this suggest the 'burn' part of her name? Are any of these possibly relevant, coincidental or just misleading?

Depending on what question you have chosen, you will either need to concentrate on the two main characters or discuss several others in relation to your topic. Pay special attention to how they relate to each other and how their relationships develop. Note how Jenkins makes effective use of contrasting characters, especially Sheila, Mrs Macdonald, Aunt Fiona and Hugh Sowglass.

Firstly, keep narrative viewpoint and voice in mind and consider how this affects how we view the characters.

Also discuss how far the characters change or stay the same and how important this is, especially the two main ones. You will need to examine what Matthew is like at the start, why he thinks as he does, what is unusual or strange about him, the challenges and conflicts he experiences during the story and the qualities that are revealed as a result. Look closely at how he relates to other characters and what they think of him, and what this reveals – especially his grandfather, his father, Sheila, Mrs Macdonald, Aunt Fiona or Davy Moore.

Above all examine how he responds to and is profoundly affected by Sheila, especially his ambivalent attitude towards her. Why does he keep changing his mind about her and what do you think is his final opinion of her? Do you find him a likeable, strange, vulnerable or sympathetic character? Why? Is he as sure about certain things or people as he was at the start? How far has he changed by the end of part two? How do you think his stepmother's death would have affected the rest of his life? What kind of person does he seem to be twenty years later, according to the gossips?

Since the title is *Matthew and Sheila*, you obviously need to examine Sheila's character in some depth, by looking at how she behaves towards Matthew, the effect she has on him and how far he believes what she tells him. Notice that she first appears (Part 2, chapter 1) when he has been testing his belief that he is one of 'the Chosen'. At first she seems like a protective angel from God, but as he walks home in chapter two, he is immediately afraid of her, thinking she could only have been chosen by the Devil: but he is unable to resist her. She claims to have killed his only school friend and comes to exert great power over him, almost as if she is toying with him and manipulating him. She seems cleverly capable of changing her face to suit the audience, though sometimes the mask seems to slip, e.g. with Mrs Macdonald. How does she appear to everyone else and what sort of people does she make the greatest impression on? What sort of people does she dislike or despise most? Why can't Matthew do anything about this? What makes her behave as she does? What possible explanations does the novel provide? (e.g. chapter 24) Which one are you more inclined to accept and why?

Sheila Burnside is a very mysterious and ambiguous character, something of a Jekyll-and-Hyde figure, but she also seems to be a justified sinner, i.e. someone who believes they are one of 'the Chosen' with divine indemnity to commit evil and therefore above any normal moral code. What is ironic about this, considering what Matthew wants to believe about himself? Is she really a two-faced Devil in disguise, scheming and manipulative, dangerous and evil? After all she skilfully changes her appearance to deceive others. Matthew is at times unable

to escape from her ('who was the little fool trying to hide from?') and he seems incapable of resisting her powers. Or is she, possibly in some ways like Matthew, simply a damaged child – badly hurt or even warped by what adults in her life have done to her, driven to lie and create fantasies by a need for attention, power over others or revenge?

### **Other Characters**

Again study how Jenkins makes clever use of shifting and contrasting viewpoints, especially where we are given different views on other characters, e.g. from the Sowglass family after Matthew's grandfather's funeral or Hugh Sowglass's opinions of the others when he returns in chapter 31. How do we know they are unfair, wrong or selfish in their views? (e.g. comments about Aunt Fiona or Sowglass's opinion of his son and Mrs Macdonald.) Keep Jenkins's use of irony in mind: he often uses it to reveal more about the characters whose viewpoints are being expressed, than about the person they are talking about – because we can see them as they can't see themselves.

Also look closely at how Mrs Macdonald is presented throughout the novel and how important she becomes in Matthew's life. What sort of influence does she provide? Who does she contrast with most and how? Do we feel inclined to share or trust her viewpoint and opinions on things and people? Why is this, and how important is this to the whole novel? By the end of the novel, who has been the most powerful negative or positive influence in Matthew's life? Who has he valued most and what does this show about both him and them?

Also consider how and why Jenkins uses the voice of the community, i.e. what others in the town think, e.g. over the murder of Davy Moore, and especially in the epilogue where the gossips provide the final perspective on the main characters. What sort of people are they, and can we trust their viewpoint? What sort of places do Lunderston or Uist seem to be and how is this relevant?

### **Style and Literary Technique**

Why do you think it is appropriate or effective for Jenkins to use a very simple style of writing, with relatively few difficult words, many short simple sentences and also many short chapters?

Also note that the ratio of dialogue to narration is very high and much of the novel could easily be turned into a film or drama script. Why does he use so much dialogue and what is the effect of this? Perhaps study one particularly effective piece of dialogue and explain exactly why at this point in the story it is very dramatic, clever or revealing.

You should discuss Jenkins's use of a shifting third-person viewpoint and why you think he chose this rather than a very limited third- or first-person viewpoint (see above).

Find examples of Jenkins's use of irony. Try to explain how he uses irony to reveal the shortcomings of his characters or the contradictions in people's attitudes and behaviour, or to highlight incongruities in events or situations.

Look at his descriptions of Lunderston or Uist (e.g. the opening page, Part 2 chapters 6, 20 and 40, and the epilogue) and explain how effective you find his evocation of place or creation of atmosphere, analysing features like word choice, imagery, punctuation, syntax and sentence structure.

### Themes

The novel deals with many issues but above all it depicts the dangers of religious fanaticism, indoctrination and dogmatism and the damage done to children by unkind, neglectful or selfish adults. It reveals how easily we can be deceived or how wrong we can be about others, leaving us to debate the nature and source of evil in human life. Is it learned or fostered in us by what happens, especially in the early formative stages of life? Is a supernatural external force, the Devil, the source of all evil? Is the Devil merely a symbol for something inherent in human nature, whatever that is supposed to be? Or is it all unalterable, part of God's predetermined plan?

Therefore you could discuss how the novel makes us aware of some of the following issues via plot, character, language and style: religious fanaticism and self-righteousness; the nature of evil; the conflict of good and evil; egotism and arrogance; kindness and forgiveness; deception and deceit; adults and children; love and hate; the danger of judging others; and many more. See if you can think of some other interesting themes the novel deals with.

### Conclusion

Remember to round off your answer with a final comment on the question you have discussed.

### OTHER NOVELS FOR STUDY IN S4-6

By Robin Jenkins: *The Cone Gatherers*, *The Changeling*, *Just Duffy*, *Fergus Lamont*, *Guests of War*, *Happy for the Child*, *Poverty Castle*, *The Thistle and the Grail*, *A Would-Be Saint*, *Lunderston Tales* (short stories). See also the ASLS Scotnote on *The Cone Gatherers*.

Other related Scottish novels: James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Muriel Sparks's *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*.

Check these out in your English department or school library.