Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Stories of Ourselves Volume 2: the 2027 stories

Contents

1. The ten stories and the exam
2. The Black Ball and The Gold Watch
3. When It Happens and The Man Who Walked on the Moon
4. A Walk to the Jetty, Showing the Flag, Haywards Heath and Fluke
5. Themes, methods and how to answer
6. Key terms
7. Quick questions
8. What to do next

The ten stories and the exam

- For 2027, Cambridge sets ten stories from Stories of Ourselves Volume 2. In Paper 1 you answer one question on one story: either a passage from it, or an essay. Any of the ten can come up, so learn them all.
- Nick (Christina Rossetti, 1853): a fairy-tale **fable**. Nick has a good farm but envies his neighbours, so a tiny "rosy woman" lets him become anything he wishes for an hour at a time. As sparrows, a dog, a stick and fire, his spiteful wishes keep hurting him. A kind wish, to be a rich old man, goes wrong too when robbers nearly kill him, so he wishes to be himself again, mends the harm he did and never wishes again.
- The Woman's Rose (Olive Schreiner): the narrator keeps a faded white rose in a box. As a teenager in a small town full of men, she drew the men's attention away from the only other young woman, and the men's behaviour made the two rivals. At a party before she left, the other woman put the rose from her own hair into the narrator's, and the memory of that kindness still gives her hope.

The Black Ball and The Gold Watch

- The Black Ball (Ralph Ellison, written 1937): John, a Black janitor in a segregated American town, is raising his young son alone. His son says a white boy called him "black"; John says he is brown, and American. A white union organiser shows the scars from when a mob burned him for supporting a Black man, and invites John to a meeting. When a white boy throws the son's ball at his boss's window, the boss threatens John. John thinks about his son's future, fearing he will be "blackballed" (shut out) too, and looks for the union card.

- The Gold Watch (Mulk Raj Anand): in Bombay under British rule, Srijut Sudarshan Sharma has been a loyal dispatch clerk at Henry King & Co. for 20 years. His British boss, Mr Acton, gives him a gold watch, which Sharma realises is a reward for being forced into early retirement. Unable to protest, he drops the watch and goes home, thinking he no longer needs to know the time.

When It Happens and The Man Who Walked on the Moon

- When It Happens (Margaret Atwood, 1977): Mrs Burridge, a middle-aged farmer's wife, bottles tomatoes but can't stop worrying about the day "it" happens: some collapse or war hinted at by prices, shortages and strikes. She plans in detail how she will escape alone with a gun, while her husband and neighbours carry on as normal. "It" is never named, which makes the story more unsettling.
- The Man Who Walked on the Moon (J G Ballard): the narrator, a failed journalist living in Rio de Janeiro, now begs from tourists on Copacabana Beach, claiming to have been an astronaut. He tells how he met Mr Scranton, who earned money from tourists by pretending to be a former astronaut but had really been a crop-duster pilot. The narrator cared for Scranton until he died, then took over his flat and his story, finding a strange peace in seeing the world from a distance.

A Walk to the Jetty, Showing the Flag, Haywards Heath and Fluke

- A Walk to the Jetty (Jamaica Kincaid, 1985): the last chapter of the novel Annie John, set in Antigua. On her last morning, teenage Annie prepares to sail to England. She looks at her parents with "disgust", feels cut off from the familiar sights, and walks onto the jetty both desperate to leave and afraid.
- Showing the Flag (Jane Gardam): Philip, sent to boarding schools since he was six, sails alone to France. His mother, Gwen, has given him a small Union Jack to pin on his coat so a Major Foster can find him, but it blows away. Frightened in the crowds and on the train, he decides his mother doesn't love him, until he finds a spare flag and a loving note in his sandwiches.
- Haywards Heath (Aminatta Forna, 2010): Attila, a doctor who treats trauma in displaced people, drives to Haywards Heath to find Rosie, the woman he loved as a student and left behind. She is now in a care home with dementia and doesn't recognise him. Two months later he returns with her favourite sweets to find her dancing with a young African care worker, calling him "Attila".
- Fluke (Romesh Gunesekera): in Sri Lanka, the narrator, Vasantha, a retired taxi driver, drives Mr Weerakoon to a marketing conference. Vasantha fixes the projector, finds the marketing talk "hot air", meets a former soldier with a business plan, and finds Mr Weerakoon's lost phone. He decides that common sense and peace of mind matter more than complicated theory.

Your notes

Themes, methods and how to answer

- Shared themes: race and prejudice (The Black Ball, The Gold Watch); power and empire (The Gold Watch, Showing the Flag); memory and loss (The Woman's Rose, Haywards Heath); fear and isolation (When It Happens, A Walk to the Jetty, The Man Who Walked on the Moon); greed and envy (Nick); work and success (Fluke).
- Narrative voice: first person (The Woman's Rose, The Man Who Walked on the Moon, Fluke, A Walk to the Jetty) brings us close to a character's view; third person (Nick, When It Happens, The Gold Watch) can show more than the character knows.
- Endings matter: **twists** (Showing the Flag, Haywards Heath), **open endings** (When It Happens, The Black Ball) and lessons (Nick).
- **Symbols**: the rose, the ball, the watch, the flag, the jetty and the sweets carry each story's meaning, so analyse them closely.
- In a passage question, start with what the passage shows, analyse the writer's choices of words and structure, and link to the whole story.

Key terms

Fable	A short story that teaches a moral lesson, often with magic.
First-person narrator	A character who tells the story as "I".
Symbol	An object that stands for a bigger idea.
Open ending	An ending that leaves questions unanswered.
Twist	A surprising turn near the end of a story.
Colonialism	One country ruling another, as Britain ruled India and Antigua.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. What does Nick envy?
2. What is kept in a box in The Woman's Rose?
3. What does John's son's ball represent in The Black Ball?
4. Why is Sharma given a gold watch?
5. In When It Happens, what does Mrs Burridge fear?
6. Who was Mr Scranton really?
7. Where is Annie leaving in A Walk to the Jetty?
8. What does Philip lose on the ship in Showing the Flag?

Answers

1. His neighbours' possessions

Your notes

2. A faded white rose
3. Being shut out, or "blackballed", because of race
4. As a reward for being forced into early retirement
5. An unnamed collapse or war
6. A crop-duster pilot pretending to be an astronaut
7. Antigua, for England
8. His small Union Jack flag

What to do next

Practise 11 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

Free revision for GCSE and KS3 at lycolearn.co.uk. Some notes are for one exam board only, and say so in brackets.

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