Example critical essays

Finally, let's look at how all of this is put together, from reading the question to the finished essay.

> Choose a **novel** in which one character generates hostility from one or more than one other character.
>
> Explain the nature of the hostility and go on to discuss how the novelist's use of it adds to your understanding of the novel as a whole.

Example 1

We'll be using Robin Jenkins' novel *The Cone-Gatherers*, as it is an appropriate text to use, but you could use **any** novel you have studied **provided it matches the description in the first part of the question** (see the words highlighted in blue).

The key words of the question have been highlighted. Here's an example of the sort of notes you could produce to remind you of what to write.

First part of question:

- Calum generates hostility from Duror (+ Lady Runcie Campbell).
- Description of Calum.
- Why Duror hates him.
  - ➢ Personification of all that's wrong in his life.
  - ➢ Defiled his 'sanctuary'.
  - ➢ Revolted by anything misshapen or deformed.
  - ➢ Descent into madness.
  - ➢ Deer drive (LRC's hostility toward Calum).
  - ➢ Accusations against Calum.
  - ➢ End of novel – death of Calum.

Second part of question:

- Theme of good v. evil.
- Calum represents good and is sacrificed at the end.
- Closing lines – LRC's moment of catharsis.
- Jenkins' ending leaves the reader (like LRC) with hope.

TOP TIP

You should **always** take time to plan your essay – don't be put off by other people frantically scribbling as soon as the invigilator tells you to start.

With these (brief) notes in front of you, you could then write something like this in the remaining 40 minutes or so you will have left.

Opening paragraph identifies text and author and refers back to the question.

In 'The Cone-Gatherers' by Robin Jenkins we see the character Calum generate hostility from the evil gamekeeper Duror. The portrayal of the hostility adds to our understanding of the novel as a whole as Jenkins uses it as part of his exploration of the theme of good versus evil.

Jenkins makes the reader sympathise with Calum, a hunchback who is gathering cones with his brother in the woods of the Runcie Campbell estate during the

Second World War. Although he is deformed Jenkins portrays him as 'honest, generous and truly meek' and someone who is close to the world of nature. He is an expert climber and is 'as indigenous as squirrel or bird' in the trees on the estate. Jenkins effectively develops the character as someone who does not understand why there should be suffering in the world and throughout the novel he is portrayed as a 'Christ-like' figure.

> Quotations used to show knowledge of the text and to support the points made in the essay.

> Topic sentence

Calum generates hostility from Duror for many reasons. Duror 'hated and despised' the cone-gatherers and feels that they have defiled the wood which 'had always been his stronghold and sanctuary'. Through skilful characterisation, Jenkins portrays Duror's suffering. His wife has become hugely obese, their relationship has broken down and his attempts to sign up to fight in the war have been refused. Calum represents everything that is wrong in Duror's life. Jenkins tells us

'For many years his life had been stunted, misshapen, obscene and hideous; and this misbegotten creature was its personification.'

In addition to this Duror has always been revolted by anything misshapen or deformed and Jenkins even suggests that he sympathises with Hitler's treatment of 'idiots and cripples'. Duror is portrayed by Jenkins as a man descending into madness. He uses the image of a tree 'still showing green leaves' but with death 'creeping along the roots' to describe Duror and the reader is always aware of Duror's true nature and also that he is 'alone in his obsession'.

Duror uses Calum's unwilling involvement in the deer drive to try and remove him from the wood. Ironically it is at the deer drive that Duror's madness first shows in public when he kills the deer, confusing it with his wife Peggy. Calum attempts to save the deer but now also generates hostility from Lady Runcie Campbell who is annoyed that the event has become 'a shocking and demeaning spectacle'. Tulloch, a very 'moral' character, speaks up for the cone-gatherers. However, Duror's twisted mind also leads him to accuse Calum of exposing himself in the wood.

In the tense final chapter of the novel, the hostility Duror feels toward Calum leads to the killing of Calum and his own suicide.

> Now the essay begins to deal with the second part of the question.

Thus, Robin Jenkins uses this hostility to explore the theme of good versus evil and so adds to the reader's understanding of the novel as a whole. Calum's child-like goodness (a quality which he shares with Roderick) and his pity and concern for the animals of the wood make the reader sympathise with him. His 'sacrifice' at the end of the novel cleanses the wood of evil and gives hope for the future. Jenkins again suggests a similarity to Jesus' death on the Cross as 'he hung in a twisted fashion' in the tree after Duror shoots him. The cones and blood which fall from him are another suggestion of this religious symbol.

After the two deaths (and Roderick's return to safety), Lady Runcie Campbell undergoes a moment of catharsis and as she cries 'pity, and purified hope, and joy, welled up in her heart'. The reader experiences this too as we read this very powerful and thought-provoking climax to the novel.

Jenkins' ending leaves the reader (like Lady Runcie Campbell) with hope. Although he allows the hostility between Calum and Duror to culminate in their deaths, evil is defeated even if at great human cost. As a result, the reader is left with a greater understanding of the theme of good versus evil and of the novel as a whole.

> Concluding paragraph refers back to the key words of the question.

This essay is 660 words long. You should be able to write something of similar length in the time available to you in the exam.