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Section One – Characters

Mr Hooper

► Family circumstances

Mr. Hooper lives in a gloomy house called ‘Warings,’ that he has inherited from his deceased father. Interestingly, his tall, thin figure echoes the gloomy feeling of Warings. After the death of his wife, he advertises for an ‘informal housekeeper’ to help with the domestic chores, and to provide company for himself and his son, Edmund.

► Character

In the first chapter of the novel, we learn that Mr. Hooper’s relationship with his own father was strained and that he has ‘unhappy memories’ of his own childhood. This lack of affection and understanding affects his relationship with his own son, Edmund. It is as if the cycle has been repeated.

Mr. Hooper’s relationship with Edmund is poor. He feels that he has ‘failed […] from the very beginning’ to discipline Edmund. He regards himself as an ‘ineffectual man.’ Feeling as if he is a ‘stranger’ in Edmund’s bedroom, and that they ‘should be close together’ highlights Mr. Hooper’s loneliness.

Mr. Hooper feels frustrated because he seems to have little control over Edmund and his disobedience. He realises that maybe he should ‘strike him,’ but he lacks the confidence to assert himself. ‘He knew he would not,’ strike him.

In conversations with Edmund, Mr. Hooper always seems to be put off by his son’s abrupt manner. When Edmund insists that he wants to go into the Red Room, despite being told that he is not allowed, Mr. Hooper ‘sighed’ and politely asked Edmund will you ‘not be difficult please.’ He seems weak and easily gives in to Edmund’s demands. He is not respected.

Mr. Hooper is a ‘lonely man,’ and he is not afraid to admit it. He hopes that with the arrival of Mrs. Kingshaw and Charles that he will ‘no longer feel alone.’

Mr. Kingshaw has also experienced a failed relationship with his wife. He blames her for his own lack of control over his son, and he speaks of the ‘elaborate courtesy of the double bed’. In other words, he no longer shared intimate moments with his wife. He describes their relationship as suffering from a ‘cold gap.’ They simply shared the same bed. Mr. Hooper’s sexual frustration is revealed in two ways. When he thinks of Mrs. Kingshaw later in the novel, he feels ‘excited’ that a relationship with her would give him ‘pleasure’ and ‘satisfaction.’ His frustration with lack of a successful relationship is revealed when we learn that he often walked down side streets looking ‘for the pictures of breasts and mouths […] outside the erotic cinemas.’ Similarly, at the circus, he focuses on the ‘bodies of the girls that rippled and shone, in watery satin.’
Mr. Hooper’s failure to carve meaningful relationships with others is also evident in his relationship with Kingshaw. He seems to feel more at ease with Kingshaw that with his own son, Edmund. He mistakenly believes that he can ‘understand’ Kingshaw, and that they are ‘quite good friends.’ Yet he, like the other characters, is just as ignorant of Kingshaw’s suffering.

► The readers’ feelings toward Mr. Hooper

We feel sympathy for Mr. Hooper when we learn that he has suffered an unhappy childhood, and that it has affected his ability to form a strong bond with his own son, and perhaps his wife. We admire him when he admits that he has failed in certain aspects of his life.

However, any feelings of sympathy and admiration that we as readers might feel are replaced by feelings of anger that he seems to accept that the situation cannot be changed. He has almost given up on life. He blames his wife for Edmund’s behaviour, and seems happy with that excuse. He also chooses many times throughout the novel to deliberately ignore Kingshaw’s suffering by pretending that it is all part of growing up. Even in the episode where Kingshaw runs away to Hang Wood, and attacks Hooper on his return, he is simply told that it is a ‘bad way to behave.’ Surely, Mr. Hooper realises that something is seriously wrong.

Mr. Hooper fails to address the seriousness of the situation, and act upon it. He, like the others then, must be held in part responsible for Kingshaw’s death.

Summary – words and phrases that describe Mr. Hooper

- Lonely
- Ineffectual
- Weak
- Unconfident
- Emotionally inadequate
- Unable to feel or show emotion in a way that we are familiar with
- Selfish
- Ignorant
Mrs. Kingshaw

**Family circumstances**

Mrs. Kingshaw is a widow who has struggled to manage financially since her husband died. She and her son, Charles Kingshaw, have been used to a middle class existence, and she is keen that she is able to continue to live like this. Mrs. Kingshaw is a proud lady, and she tries to remain respectable by taking great care over her appearance, and by taking work as a housekeeper in order to support herself and her son. They have lived in various houses and in hotels, and so Mrs. Kingshaw is attracted to the stability that Warings should offer.

**Character**

Mrs. Kingshaw wants the best for her son as most mothers do. However, it is clear from early on in the novel that she seems to be more concerned about keeping up appearances, even at the expense of Charles’s happiness. When we are introduced to Mrs. Kingshaw, we are told that she arrives in a suit. Her main concerns are only that feels worried that it might be ‘too smart,’ and that she is keen that Charles creates a good impression by helping with the suitcases.

She quickly settles into Warings, ignoring the tension between Charles and Edmund. Trying to force them to play games together, she mistakenly believes will ‘cement their friendship.’ Mrs. Kingshaw is selfish, and concerned only with superficial things. She ‘threw herself into planning the cocktail party,’ whilst choosing to ignore Charles’s suffering at the hands of Edmund.

When Mr. Hooper raises concerns about leaving the boys whilst they go to London, she is quick to point out that it will be an ‘adventure for them.’ Again, she puts herself first. Clearly, it is not an adventure as Charles runs away. She is oblivious to his desperation.

Keen to keep up the appearance of a happy family, she takes Edmund’s side when they return from Hang Wood. She believes Edmund’s lies that Charles pushed him into the water. She is self centred, concerned only about how ‘ashamed’ Charles makes her feel. She chooses to ignore his protests, and even tries to force Charles to apologise. The distance between mother and son is evident when, after Charles has been sent to his room for attacking Edmund, she goes up to see him. She is unable to relate to her son now, and even when he tells her of his deep hatred for Edmund, she attempts to trivialise his deep feelings. ‘Oh that is a wicked, wicked way to talk,’ she warns him.

Desperate to secure her own happiness at any cost, she persists in attempting to force Charles to get on with Edmund. After his fall from Leydell castle, she repeatedly pressurises Charles to sit with Edmund and play games with him, as he cannot get out of bed. She dismisses her son’s worries as ‘silly persistent talk’ of which she shall ‘take no notice.’

Her final act of insensitivity is agreeing to marry Mr. Hooper. She looks forward to the wedding, putting all thoughts of Charles’s unhappiness to the back of her mind.

At the end of the novel, it is interesting to note that she puts her arms around Edmund as if to comfort him when they discover Charles’s lifeless body. But it is no surprise that she doesn’t want him to ‘look and be upset.’ What is so wrong with being upset at this point? Maybe years of hiding her true feelings have made her unable to grieve properly.
The readers’ feelings toward Mrs. Kingshaw

Mrs. Kingshaw is painted as a very unattractive character, there is little if anything that shows that she truly puts Charles’s interests first. If she was so determined to provide him with the best start in life, then surely she would have tried to find an alternative when she realised that he was so unhappy at Warings. Failing this, she could have listened to his concerns instead of brushing them under the carpet.

Even putting this aside, Mrs. Kingshaw fails to listen to her son, and is unable to show him any warmth. We are told that she is a cold and distant woman, and has rarely shown physical affection to Charles as he has been growing up. He remembers how there ‘was no warmth or comfort,’ in her embrace. We feel that she has failed her son, and angry that he has suffered because of her selfishness.

Again, Mrs. Kingshaw, like Mr. Hooper, fails her son. Though she doesn’t realise it or admit to it, she has a limited understanding of Charles’s development and his needs.

Summary – words and phrases that describe Mrs. Kingshaw

- Shallow
- Proud
- Concerned with superficial things
- Selfish
- Self-centred
- Cold
- Distant
- Insensitive
- Anxious to please Mr. Hooper
Charles Kingshaw

Family circumstances

Charles Kingshaw is ten years old, and is the only child of Mrs. Kingshaw. His father has died in the war, and he has lived in a succession of houses and hotels since his father has died. Previously, he has been at a boarding school, where he remained unnoticed because he was a quiet and average pupil.

The novel is a study of childhood, and therefore Charles is a very important character. Large parts of the story are told through his eyes.

Character

Susan Hill describes both boys as ‘misfits,’ and it is clear to see why this may apply to Charles Kingshaw. From the beginning of the novel, he is revealed to be extremely fearful and sensitive, even before anything unpleasant has happened to him. Before he had read Hooper’s note, he ‘stuffed it fearfully into his trouser pocket.’ Kingshaw automatically believes that others are stronger or better than him. He ‘flushed brick red,’ and ‘stepped back,’ as Hooper questioned him about why they have come to Warings.

Kingshaw does try to defend himself at the beginning, and this culminates in the violent scrap when he refused to obey Hooper and close the window. This confidence is however, short-lived. Kingshaw has a low self esteem, and he soon begins to feel that ‘Hooper had won.’ He lacks the confidence to feel good about fighting back, and convinces himself that Hooper was stronger.

Kingshaw’s fertile imagination and over sensitivity are revealed in the incident with the crow. He imagines that the crow that is circling overhead in the cornfield will kill him. Hooper who exploits Kingshaw’s fear by putting a stuffed crow in his bed late that night witnesses his ‘sobbing and panting,’ His extreme fear is demonstrated when we learn that he ‘dared not reach out his hand, lay stiff, his eyes wide open,’ Hooper picks up on Kingshaw’s insecurity and fear, and uses it as a weapon to torment him with by being cruel in the future. Shortly after this episode, Hooper locks Kingshaw in the Red Room making him cry and be ‘violently sick.’ Kingshaw feels resigned to being the victim, and goes in from the beginning thinking that he ‘would be beaten.’

Kingshaw cannot face the ‘relentless persecution,’ which he suffers at the hands of Hooper, and this leads him to run away to Hang Wood. Initially, he is happy here, he ‘liked the sense of being completely hidden.’ This changes with the arrival of Hooper and his anxious state returns.

Unexpectedly, Kingshaw becomes the leader after Hooper becomes terrified of the thunderstorm. Kingshaw’s kindness and compassion are shown as he comforts Hooper in a ‘rush of embarrassed kindness.’ Kingshaw turns down his chance to seek revenge on Hooper, and decides that being vindictive is of no benefit to him. This capacity for kindness is admirable after Hooper’s cruelty. Again though, Kingshaw lacks confidence in himself, as he realises that once they return to Warings, he will be bullied again as he does not have the ability to remain strong and confident in his own abilities.
Kingshaw feels increasingly isolated from those around him when he returns from Hang Wood and is punished for attacking Hooper. He retreats into his own world, wishing that he could escape once again. Feeling increasingly vulnerable, Kingshaw breaks down again into ‘sobs of terror’ when he is locked in the shed and Hooper torments him, warning that he will never be found alive. Kingshaw is becoming increasingly desperate, and every new challenge seems to overwhelm him. He is terrified of starting a new school as he fears that the bullying will continue, especially as Hooper attends the same school and has threatened to help others to make his life unpleasant as well.

Kingshaw finds temporary happiness in his new friend, Anthony Fielding. We see that given the encouragement that he so desperately needs, Charles can enjoy his childhood. He plays in the fields, ‘running and leaping.’ He decides that he ‘must be like Fielding,’ but in reality, he knows that he cannot be as he doesn’t have the confidence of the self-assurance to be like that. Fielding allows us to see that Kingshaw is too sensitive. He reminds Kingshaw that Hooper is only able to hurt him so much because he allows himself to become upset by it.

Depressed by his mother’s forthcoming marriage to Mr. Hooper and frightened by Hooper’s final note warning him that ‘SOMETHING WILL HAPPEN TO YOU,’ is more than Kingshaw can handle. He feels that he has lost his only friend. Fielding, when he goes off to play with Hooper, and cannot cope with the uncertainty of the threat. Kingshaw sees that suicide is the only escape that will alleviate his suffering once and for all.

► The readers’ feelings toward Charles Kingshaw

Charles Kingshaw is a sensitive boy, and he appears irritatingly babyish at times in the novel. Perhaps teenage boys might even consider him to be responsible, as he doesn’t defend himself strongly or for long enough.

However, he has suffered the loss of a parent, and his mother doesn’t seem to care. In addition, he hasn’t had a stable family home for a long time. Perhaps it is understandable that he is so desperately insecure and lacking in confidence. Is lacking in confidence at an early age such a crime? Most of the novel is told through the eyes of Charles, and we are encouraged to feel sympathy for him and the persecution that he suffers. Kingshaw shows an amazing capacity for kindness. We admire his decision not to take revenge on Hooper when he is given the opportunity, and his courage in saving Hooper’s life.

Charles Kingshaw is a child with many problems, but he is a gentle and kind child who is forced to commit suicide because he can’t find another solution. Whatever we make of his weaknesses, we cannot fail to be outraged that such a sensitive boy has died in such torment. Our over riding feelings are of sadness and anger at those who could have prevented this tragic conclusion.

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<td>Fertile imagination</td>
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<td>Compassionate / kind</td>
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<tr>
<td>Desperate to be loved and accepted</td>
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<td>Desperate to escape Hooper’s clutches</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lacking in self confidence</td>
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<td>Low self esteem</td>
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Edmund Hooper

► Family circumstances

Edmund Hooper is an only child and has lived with this father since his mother’s death. He is ten years old.

► Character

Edmund Hooper is an odd child. He is cold and sullen, and warns his father at the start of the novel that ‘nobody must come to Warings.’ He has a poor relationship with his father, and is disobedient and disrespectful towards him. His choice of a ‘narrow, dark bedroom’ and his preoccupation with drawing battle plans alone in his room give us an insight into the mind of a detached and isolated boy who is happy with only his own company. Hooper has no friends, but this is his own choice. He makes it clear in the hostile reception that he offers Kingshaw that he wants to be left alone. The only type of relationship that Hooper seems to be able to have is one where he controls other people.

Hooper does not simply try to drive Kingshaw away from Warings, so that he can be alone, master of the house. He actively seeks pleasure from making Kingshaw so unhappy, and goes out of his way to torment him. He is a cruel and twisted individual who often manipulates the adults into believing that he is a sweet child, and that he has been helping Charles get to know the house.

After placing the stuffed crow in Kingshaw’s bed, he pretends at the breakfast table the next morning that nothing has happened. He offers Kingshaw the toy model submarine from the cereal packet and ‘smiled a sweet smile.’ He even tells his father that Kingshaw doesn’t want to play with him and that he ‘locks himself up,’ Again, he seeks to shift blame onto Kingshaw ‘I can’t help that can I?’ he asks. Hooper is contemptuous of his father’s attempts to make him more welcoming. Later in the novel, he casually explains his lateness to lunch by lying that he had been ‘playing bandits’ with Kingshaw, when in fact he had locked Kingshaw in the shed.

Hooper is so easily able to control others because he studies their reactions and picks out and exploits weaknesses. He is calculating as he continues to target, for example, Kingshaw’s lack of confidence, and this allows him to destroy him completely. Hooper is very frightened in the wood, and is a quivering nervous wreck. He has the capacity however to pull himself together when he is removed from this situation. He doesn’t allow his fear of a thunder-storm to dominate his existence. He gains control almost immediately when he is out of the wood by bullying Kingshaw again. Hooper is relentless, and this is how he manages to keep Kingshaw terrified of him, never allowing Kingshaw to think for one minute that he is safe. He claims that he has the power to ‘make anyone do anything’ to Kingshaw at school.

Hooper fails to have the same control over Fielding as he tests him by asking whether he would like to go into the Red Room to see the moths. Fielding’s eager response takes any control that Hooper might have had over him away as he isn’t frightened.
The readers’ feelings toward Edmund Hooper

At the end of the novel when Hooper sees Kingshaw’s body floating in the water, we feel repulsed by Hooper’s pride as he feels a ‘spurt of triumph’ that he ‘did that [forced Kingshaw into suicide].’ He feels no remorse, shock or even bewilderment. As a reader, it is hard to understand this reaction. It is even more difficult when we consider that a ten year old can have such control over his emotions.

Hooper has no conscience, and enjoys the relentless bullying of Kingshaw. He is cold and calculating, manipulative and secretive. His lack of remorse at the end of the novel raises the possibility that evil does exist in children.

Edmund Hooper is a child, and sometimes his behaviour shows this. He enjoys reading a monster story on the way to London, he builds model castles, and he is terrified of the thunder in Hang Wood. Such snapshots remind the reader that despite his cruelty, he still is a ten-year-old child.

Perhaps we feel sympathy for him as he has been shown little warmth or love in his own dysfunctional family. Children are not born in such a way; they are a product of our society. In Fielding though, and at school he does have a clearer picture of how people form loving relationships.

However our overriding feeling is one of fear. We never really understand Hooper’s motives, and are repeatedly shocked by his monstrous behaviour. The novel is set in the 1960’s, but the murder of James Bulger in Liverpool in 1994 by two ten year olds shows that such evil really does exist. Again it forces us to consider the disastrous consequences if society fails in its responsibility to children.

Summary – words and phrases that describe Edmund Hooper

- Cold
- Sullen
- Disobedient
- Disrespectful
- Hostile
- Cruel
- Manipulative
- Scheming
- Bully / tormentor
- Relentless
- Sly
- Seeks to control others
- Monstrous
- Shows no remorse
- No conscience
- Unable to form loving relationships
- Isolated
- Detached from others
- No human feelings
- Evil

Susan Hill described Hooper as a ‘misfit.’
Anthony Fielding

► Family circumstances

Anthony Fielding lives on a farm with his parents. He has a normal relationship with his parents, and appears to be able to make friends easily. Fielding only appears in three chapters, but he is an important character as he demonstrates that childhood happiness does exist. He also acts as a contrast to show just how sensitive Kingshaw is, and how little control Hooper has over other children.

► Character

Fielding appears to have the confidence that Kingshaw lacks and makes friends easily with Kingshaw. In contrast, we are told that Kingshaw is ‘frightened.’ Fielding invites Kingshaw to play in the field, and for once we are told that Kingshaw is at ‘ease.’

Fielding tries to reassure Kingshaw that Hooper cannot hurt him when he tries to frighten him. He tells Kingshaw to be forceful and tell Hooper to ‘stuff it.’ Fielding offers practical advice and tells Kingshaw that he will be his friend, and that he is welcome to come to the farm anytime.

Fielding has grown up helping out on the farm, and therefore he sees natural events first hand. Although he has a pet tortoise, he is not sentimental. He talks of chopping heads off the turkeys at Christmas so that they can sell their meat.

Fielding is enthusiastic, and accompanies his father to market with a calf that is going to be slaughtered. He offers Kingshaw the chance to join them. Again Kingshaw’s contrasting behaviour reveals him to be ‘anxious’ and sensitive when he declines the offer after making an excuse.

In an interesting parallel, Hooper takes Fielding to the Red Room. He is enthusiastic and keen to see the moths. He even calls them ‘butterflies.’ When Fielding agrees to go into the room with Hooper, it means that Hooper has no hold over Fielding, no excuse to bully him for being frightened. In his relationship with Hooper, Fielding shows that he is able to make friends with different people quite easily.

► The readers’ feelings toward Anthony Fielding

For the reader, Anthony Fielding represents normality. We probably can relate to his experiences better that we can to those of Kingshaw or Hooper. Fielding shows us that well balanced and secure children can emerge from loving families. His endless carefree days spent playing with other children undisturbed by the adult world brings a welcome sense of normality to an otherwise sad novel.

Summary – words and phrases that describe Anthony Fielding

- Independent
- Well-balanced
- Confident
- Friendly
- Enthusiastic
- Practical
- Not sentimental
- Illustrates that childhood happiness does exist
- Caring
- Good listener (advises Kingshaw on how to treat Hooper and his taunts)
- Normal
- Good relationship with parents
Section Two – Setting

The novel is set amongst the English upper classes in the 1960’s, although there are few clues as to the period of time. (At this time, America was involved in the Vietnam War). This is because the issues and themes that the novel deals with are timeless. Isolation, bullying and suicidal children still exist today.

Both boys – Hooper and Kingshaw – have had a privileged start to life. Hooper lives in Warings, a mansion that his father has inherited, and both boys attend fee private boarding schools. In keeping with upper class tradition, they refer to each other by their surname. Mr. Hooper often travels to London, and is absent for long periods because of commitments to his job.

► Warings

Warings is a mansion that has been built by Edmund Hooper’s grandfather, and has been inherited by his own father. Warings is an isolated, but imposing house. Warings is described as ‘ugly,’ and ‘entirely graceless.’ It is ‘without any tree or flower bed.’

Mr Hooper recalls how he had ‘unhappy memories’ of the time that he spent there as a child. It has ‘narrow rooms’ with ‘tall windows’ that block out the natural light. Mrs. Boland, the cook, also thinks that Warings is ‘too dark,’ and smells ‘unlived in, of old things.’

The gloomy atmosphere of Warings is symbolic. The fact that this is the first place that we see in the novel is symbolic. The Red Room, which is permanently locked and houses a collection of dead moths, is important. It reflects the isolation of the people who live in it; they are locked away from each other’s feelings. The dead moths remind us of the death and decay of the people who live in Warings. Mr. Hooper, Edmund and Mrs. Kingshaw’s capacity to love and care for others have died. Kingshaw is literally being pushed towards death each time Edmund torments him. It is interesting to note that when Charles Kingshaw runs away to Hang Wood, he is happy being amongst nature. It is almost as if Warings represents an unnatural existence.

► Hang Wood

For Kingshaw, Hang Wood represents an escape. After feeling so desperate, he now ‘liked it here.’ He liked the ‘smell’ and the sense of being ‘completely hidden.’ The ‘shaft of sunlight’ that beams down as Kingshaw watches the rabbit and the pigeons is almost ‘Heavenly.’ Although Kingshaw ‘froze’ when he realises that Hooper has found him, he is unaffected by the fierce thunderstorm.

Kingshaw is more confident in the wood, and even reassures and comforts Hooper who is terrified. For a time, Kingshaw becomes the leader. It is Kingshaw who decides to tie the ball of string around the tree, and tries to find his way out of the wood after they become lost.
In a rare glimpse of happiness, the boys play together in the stream. Kingshaw feels so happy, that he forgets his misery at the hands of Hooper. He ‘never wants to leave it.’ They race about ‘splashing and yelling.’ Although we don’t realise it until the end of the novel, Kingshaw has found true happiness and peace here. It is the place of safety that he returns to and ends his own life because it was ‘where he wanted to be.’ It is also interesting that even Hooper seems to behave in a kinder way when he is in the wood. Some of his actions could be put down to needing Kingshaw’s help, but he does feed the bird when they are short of food, and he seems to genuinely enjoy playing with Kingshaw in the water. He even seems grateful when Kingshaw offers him a plaster for his toe.

► Fielding’s Farm

Fielding’s farm is another place that Kingshaw finds temporary happiness. Again, it is significant that he boys play outside in the stream, and go looking for slow-worms in the fields. They play pretending to be in a sea battle, and both Kingshaw and Fielding really become involved in the game. It is significant that they walk together across a bridge that has a stream below. By crossing the stream, Kingshaw leaves behind a sad existence that is slowly killing him to one that offers life (remember that water is traditionally a symbol of life).

Similarly, the cycle of life of life and death at the farm mirrors the natural cycle of life. Birth is celebrated, and death is only part of a natural process. This offers a stark contrast to Warings where everything is gloomy and decaying.

► Leydell Castle

After going out for the day as a ‘family,’ Kingshaw decides to explore the castle alone, and climbs up the high walls leaving Hooper down below. Kingshaw invites Hooper to join him but he is too frightened. Once away from the confines of Warings, Kingshaw feels confident again. Eventually, Hooper follows Kingshaw but becomes stuck, and frightened to move wets his pants. Kingshaw feels an intense hatred of Hooper and knows that if he wanted to, he could make him fall. He chooses not to though because Kingshaw knows that once he returns to Warings, he will become the victim again. He is not strong enough to fight Hooper off forever. Kingshaw tries to help Hooper, but Hooper falls. After what we have seen in Hang Wood, we can be certain that Hooper will blame Kingshaw for this accident too.

Although we know that Kingshaw’s dominance won’t last, we feel as pleased as he is when he stands tall on the castle and proudly exclaims. ‘I’m the King of the Castle.’
Section Three – Themes

► Childhood

Susan Hill described this novel as one about ‘cruelty and the power of evil.’ Cruelty is explored in this novel primarily through the character of Edmund Hooper. Perhaps his early childhood experiences – the fact that his mother has died, his father spends long periods of time away from home, and that their relationship is poor – affects his capacity to grow as a happy child should be expected to.

Similarly, Kingshaw’s insecurity could be traced back to the fact that his own home life is far from stable at the moment. His father has been killed, and he has moved around a lot in the past few years. His relationship with his mother is also distant, perhaps partly as a result of spending long periods of time away at boarding school.

Both boys display extremes of character, and Susan Hill described them both as ‘misfits.’ In Hooper we struggle to understand what motivates a child to behave in such a cruel way. In part, he is a product of a society that has failed to show him love, or how to love others. The effect on him is alarming. He almost becomes sub-human. Any sympathy that we might have felt towards him, evaporates when he gloats over Kingshaw’s death.

The novel challenges our belief that childhood is always happy. Children such as Hooper are capable of perpetrating the most unimaginable acts of wickedness, and others such as Kingshaw suffer terribly as a result. In recent months, there have been stories of youngsters who have taken their own lives as they feel that it offers the only escape from the persecution that they have to suffer each day. The horrifying murder of James Bulger in Liverpool in 1994 by two ten year olds, who themselves had been abused, shows how accurate Susan Hill’s predictions were.

Children’s perceptions are often as acute as adults’ perception, but they are sometimes powerless to sort out difficulties alone. Kingshaw feels pain as deeply as any adult would, and he knows how he can escape it. However, without the help of the adults, he is powerless to change the situation.

Childhood is not so damaging for most of us, and this is why Anthony Fielding is such an important character. He shows that in a home where children are loved and made to feel secure, then they can develop into confident well-balanced young people.

► Isolation and lack of love

Every character – apart from Fielding – is shown to be isolated from the others in this novel. Mr. Hooper reminds us very early on that he had a distant and difficult relationship with his own father. This causes him to feel isolated from his own son and he struggles to love Edmund. He simply does not know how to love and be loved.

Mrs. Kingshaw appears to love Charles, but he tells us repeatedly that she does not understand how he feels and that her hugs lack ‘affection and warmth.’ She is lonely when she arrives at Warings and is keen to make a friend of Mr. Hooper. She is preoccupied with looking pretty and arranging cocktail parties. Her ignorance of Charles’s suffering, and the way in which she dismisses it when he tries to explain, shows how isolated and out of touch she really is. In addition, she is also fooled by Hooper’s pretence that he is kind to her son.
Edmund Hooper is an extreme example of how a lack of love and isolation can damage an individual. Even as a young child, he prefers to be alone. His loneliness is unwelcoming and unnerving. Even his own father feels like a 'stranger' in his own room. One of the most disturbing thoughts of Hooper's is when he wonders why he is unable to 'feel his own mother's absence.' He is also unable to imagine how to feel sad that someone close has died. This indicates that he does not really know what love is. Hooper has no conscience and seems to exist in some sort of emotional vacuum.

Charles Kingshaw's mother tries to show that she loves him, but he feels unloved. As the novel progresses, he also feels increasingly isolated. Even when he tries to share his pain with his mother, she dismisses his fears as silly and calls him naughty. Lack of love and isolation zaps Kingshaw's confidence and leaves him feeling very insecure. He won't fight back and resigns himself to being a victim.

Interestingly, Kingshaw feels loved and valued when he visits Fielding's farm, and this helps him to feel happy and confident about himself. Fielding is kind and resourceful. He tries to help Kingshaw deal with and overcome the isolation that dominates his life.

Relationships at Warings are stale and dead, and this is reflected in the dark gloomy house that is home to a collection of dead moths. In contrast vitality and life are found at the farm. It is in this natural setting that Susan Hill chooses to depict normality.

**Nature**

**The Red Room**

The natural world plays an important part in the novel, although this is not obvious at first. Nature is used, often symbolically, to suggest things to us.

The contents of the Red Room – a collection of dead moths and stuffed animals have been neglected and are beginning to decay. Some of the moths have already disintegrated into dust. It is no accident that the largest moth is aptly called the 'Death's Head Moth.' The way in which the moths are carefully arranged in the glass cabinets suggests almost an obsession – a hobby that was also carried out alone. Just like Kingshaw they are trapped, being kept in unnatural surroundings.

It is worth noting that the stuffed animals were to remind Edmund's grandfather of a 'sporting person.' Killing animals for fun is not sport, and perhaps will remind us later that just as the animals were, Kingshaw is now being hunted too.

**The Crow**

The crow that circles above Kingshaw and that attacks him in the field is doing what comes naturally to it. It seems odd that Susan Hill goes into so much detail here when the novel is mainly focused on the relationship between the boys. However, the crow is symbolic. When it attacks Kingshaw, it mirrors his relationship with Hooper. Hooper is the predatory hunter and Kingshaw is his prey. The story of the crow shows us in a fresh way the extent to which Kingshaw is suffering.
Hang wood
Kingshaw is happy and feels a sense of inner peace as he enters the wood alone. We are told that as he watches the rabbit in front of him, he remembers those that were kept in cages at school. The vitality of the rabbit in its natural environment is different from the ‘fat’ rabbits with ‘vacant’ eyes that are kept at school. In the rabbit, Kingshaw admires the freedom that he lacks. It is not caged or trapped, but free and content. Perhaps this is why it appears so attractive to Kingshaw.

The dead rabbit that the boys find in the wood demonstrates their different attitudes to death. Even though it is dead, and of no use, Kingshaw cares for it and nurses it until he realises that it is infested with maggots. At this point, he recoils, and throws the rabbit violently away from him. Watching him carefully, Hooper has sensed Kingshaw’s fear, and uses this as a reason to mock him. Hooper on the other hand, is dismissive, comparing the dead rabbit to the time when he saw the body of his grandfather. His unemotional response ‘I saw my grandfather dead. That wasn’t long ago.’ highlights the difference between the boys. Whilst Kingshaw seems over sensitive, Hooper lacks any emotion.

In a rare glimpse of kindness, Hooper feeds the bird crumbs from his hand, even though the boys are lost and short of food. This is the only kindness that Hooper shows throughout the entire novel, and it is significant that it is in a natural environment, and not in Warings.

Fielding’s Farm
The cyclical pattern of nature is evident at the farm. Whilst animals are slaughtered, it is interesting to note that the turkeys are being prepared for Christmas – a family celebration. Fielding also owns a pet hamster, and Archie the tortoise. Producing meat is part of the family business, but Fielding also has the capacity to love animals as pets too.