

A scenic \_\_\_\_\_ of palms and clouds and trellis balustrades stood in the \_\_\_\_\_. Sophy's \_\_\_\_\_ was sitting in a chair while her \_\_\_\_\_. They all wore white \_\_\_\_\_ stood all around in formal \_\_\_\_\_. They all wore white \_\_\_\_\_ dresses and \_\_\_\_\_ with silk roses as well as \_\_\_\_\_ brooches and bracelets.

## PERSONAL RESPONSE

- Imagine you are in a situation similar to Sophy's. What would you try to do to avoid arguing with your mother?
  - Speak with her about your feelings as a daughter towards both her and your father.
  - Listen to her complaints against your father and try to understand her position.
  - Allow her to share confidences.
  - Suggest possible means of her coming to terms with your father.
  - Speak to your father taking your mother's side.
  - Other possibilities.
- Think of Sophy's dream about a wonderful world. Do you share her vision? What is your idea of a harmonious world?

# AN OLD WOMAN AND HER CAT

DORIS LESSING



Her name was Hetty, and she was born with the twentieth century. She was seventy when she died of cold and malnutrition. She had been alone for a long time, since her husband had died of pneumonia in a bad winter soon after the Second World War. He had not been more than middle-aged. Her four children were now middle-aged, with grown children. Of these descendants one daughter sent her Christmas cards, but otherwise she did not exist for them. For they were all respectable people, with homes and good jobs and cars. And Hetty was not respectable. She had always been a bit strange, these people said, when mentioning her at all.

When Fred Pennefather, her husband, was alive, and the children just growing up, they all lived much too close and uncomfortable in a Council flat<sup>1</sup> in that part of London which is like an estuary, with tides of people flooding in and out.<sup>2</sup> They were not half a mile from the great stations of Euston, St Pancras and King's Cross.<sup>3</sup> The blocks of flats were pioneers in that area, standing up grim,<sup>4</sup> grey, hideous,<sup>5</sup> among many acres of little houses and gardens, all soon to be demolished so that they could be replaced by more tall grey blocks. The

- Council flat:** un appartamento che appartiene al "town council" (comune), di solito di poche pretese e con un affitto modesto
- with tides of people flooding in and out:** con ondate di persone che andavano e venivano
- Euston, St Pancras and King's Cross:** tre delle maggiori stazioni ferroviarie di Londra
- grim:** torvi
- hideous:** orrendi

Pennefathers were good tenants,<sup>6</sup> paying their rent,<sup>7</sup> keeping out of debt; he was a building worker, 'steady',<sup>8</sup> and proud of it. There was no evidence then of Hetty's future dislocation from the normal,<sup>9</sup> unless it was that she very often slipped down<sup>10</sup> for an hour or so to the platforms where the locomotives drew in and ground out<sup>11</sup> again. She liked the smell of it all, she said. She liked to see people moving about, 'coming and going from all those foreign places'. She meant Scotland, Ireland, the North of England. These visits into the din,<sup>12</sup> the smoke, the massed swirling people,<sup>13</sup> were for her a drug, like other people's drinking or gambling.<sup>14</sup> Her husband teased her,<sup>15</sup> calling her a gipsy.<sup>16</sup> She was in fact part-gipsy, for her mother had been one, but had chosen to leave her people and marry a man who lived in a house. Fred Pennefather liked his wife for being different from the run<sup>17</sup> of the women he knew, and had married her because of it; but her children were fearful that her gipsy blood might show itself in worse ways than haunting<sup>18</sup> railway stations. She was a tall woman with a lot of glossy<sup>19</sup> black hair, a skin that tanned<sup>20</sup> easily, and dark strong eyes. She wore bright colours, and enjoyed quick tempers<sup>21</sup> and sudden reconciliations. In her prime<sup>22</sup> she attracted attention, was proud and handsome. All this made it inevitable that the people in those streets should refer to her as 'that gipsy woman'. When she heard them, she shouted back that she was none the worse for that.

After her husband died and the children married and left, the Council moved her to a small flat in the same building. She

6. **tenants:** inquilini  
 7. **rent:** affitto  
 8. **'steady':** 'regolare'  
 9. **future dislocation from the normal:** futuro discostarsi dalla normalità  
 10. **slipped down:** sgattaiolava  
 11. **drew in and ground out:** entravano e uscivano arrancando  
 12. **din:** frastuono  
 13. **massed swirling people:** turbinio di gente ammassata

got a job selling food in a local store, but found it boring. There seem to be traditional occupations for middle-aged women living alone, the busy and responsible part of their lives being over. Drink. Gambling. Looking for another husband. A wistful affair<sup>23</sup> or two. That's about it. Hetty went through a period of, as it were, testing out all these, like hobbies, but tired of them. While still earning her small wage<sup>24</sup> as a saleswoman, she began a trade in buying and selling second-hand clothes. She did not have a shop of her own, but bought or begged<sup>25</sup> clothes from householders,<sup>26</sup> and sold these to stalls<sup>27</sup> and the second-hand shops. She adored doing this. It was a passion. She gave up her respectable job and forgot all about her love of trains and travellers. Her room was always full of bright bits of cloth,<sup>28</sup> a dress that had a pattern she fancied<sup>29</sup> and did not want to sell, strips of beading,<sup>30</sup> old furs,<sup>31</sup> embroidery,<sup>32</sup> lace.<sup>33</sup> There were street traders<sup>34</sup> among the people in the flats, but there was something in the way Hetty went about it that lost her friends. Neighbours of twenty or thirty years' standing said she had gone queer,<sup>35</sup> and wished to know her no longer. But she did not mind. She was enjoying herself too much, particularly the moving about the streets with her old perambulator,<sup>36</sup> in which she crammed<sup>37</sup> what she was buying or selling. She liked the gossiping, the bargaining, the wheedling<sup>38</sup> from householders. It was this last which – and she knew this quite well of course – the neighbours objected to. It was the thin edge of the wedge.<sup>39</sup> It was begging. Decent people did not beg. She was no longer decent.

23. **wistful affair:** malinconica relazione sentimentale  
 24. **wage:** salario  
 25. **begged:** elemosinava  
 26. **householders:** privati  
 27. **stalls:** bancarelle  
 28. **cloth:** stoffa  
 29. **she fancied:** che le piaceva  
 30. **beading:** perline  
 31. **furs:** pellicce  
 32. **embroidery:** ricami  
 33. **lace:** pizzo  
 34. **street traders:** ambulanti  
 35. **had gone queer:** era diventata strana  
 36. **perambulator:** carrozzella  
 37. **crammed:** stipava  
 38. **the gossiping, ... the wheedling:** lo spettegolare, il mercanteggiare, l'ottenere con lusinghe  
 39. **It was the thin edge of the wedge (idiom.):** Era l'orlo del precipizio

Lonely in her tiny flat, she was there as little as possible, always preferring the lively streets. But she had after all to spend some time in her room, and one day she saw a kitten lost and trembling in a dirty corner, and brought it home to the block of flats. She was on a fifth floor. While the kitten was growing into a large strong tom,<sup>40</sup> he ranged about<sup>41</sup> that conglomeration of staircases and lifts and many dozens of flats, as if the building were a town. Pets were not actively persecuted by the authorities, only forbidden and then tolerated. Hetty's life from the coming of the cat became more sociable, for the beast was always making friends with somebody in the cliff<sup>42</sup> that was the block of flats across the court, or not coming home for nights at a time so that she had to go and look for him and knock on doors and ask, or returning home kicked and limping,<sup>43</sup> or bleeding after a fight with his kind. She made scenes with the kickers, or the owners of the enemy cats, exchanged cat lore<sup>44</sup> with cat-lovers, was always having to bandage and nurse her poor Tibby. The cat was soon a scarred<sup>45</sup> warrior with fleas,<sup>46</sup> a torn<sup>47</sup> ear, and a ragged look<sup>48</sup> to him. He was a multi-coloured cat and his eyes were small and yellow. He was a long way down the scale from<sup>49</sup> the delicately coloured, elegantly shaped pedigree cats. But he was independent, and often caught himself pigeons when he could no longer stand the tinned cat food, or the bread and packet<sup>50</sup> gravy<sup>51</sup> Hetty fed him, and he purred<sup>52</sup> and nestled<sup>53</sup> when she grabbed him to her bosom<sup>54</sup> at those times she suffered loneliness. This happened less and less. Once she had realized that her children

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40. **tom:** gatto maschio  
41. **ranged about:** girovagava per scogliera  
42. **cliff:** scogliera  
43. **kicked and limping:** preso a calci e zoppicante  
44. **cat lore:** notizie sugli usi e i costumi dei gatti  
45. **scarred:** sifregiato  
46. **fleas:** pulci  
47. **torn:** lacerato

were hoping that she would leave them alone because the old rag-trader<sup>55</sup> was an embarrassment to them, she accepted it, and a bitterness that always had wild humour in it welled up<sup>56</sup> only at times like Christmas. She sang or chanted to the cat: "You nasty old beast, filthy<sup>57</sup> old cat, nobody wants you, do they Tibby, no, you're just an alley tom,<sup>58</sup> just an old stealing cat, hey Tibbs, Tibbs, Tibbs".

The building teemed with<sup>59</sup> cats. There were even a couple of dogs. They all fought up and down the grey cement corridors. There were sometimes dog and cat messes<sup>60</sup> which someone had to clear up, but which might be left for days and weeks as part of neighbourly wars and feuds.<sup>61</sup> There were many complaints. Finally an official came from the Council to say that the ruling<sup>62</sup> about keeping animals was going to be enforced.<sup>63</sup> Hetty, like the others, would have to have her cat destroyed. This crisis coincided with a time of bad luck for her. She had had flu,<sup>64</sup> had not been able to earn money; had found it hard to get out for her pension; had run into debt. She owed a lot of back rent, too. A television set she had hired<sup>65</sup> and was not paying for attracted the visits of a television representative.<sup>66</sup> The neighbours were gossiping that Hetty had 'gone savage'.<sup>66</sup> This was because the cat had brought up the stairs and along the passageways a pigeon he had caught, shedding<sup>67</sup> feathers and blood all the way; a woman coming in to complain found Hetty plucking<sup>68</sup> the pigeon to stew it,<sup>69</sup> as she had done with others, sharing the meal with Tibby.

"You're filthy," she would say to him, setting the stew down to cool in his dish. "Filthy old thing. Eating that dirty old

55. **rag-trader:** straccivendola  
56. **welled up:** sgorgava  
57. **filthy:** disgustoso  
58. **alley tom:** gatto randagio  
59. **teemed with:** brulicava di  
60. **messes:** escrementi  
61. **feuds:** liti  
62. **ruling:** le regole  
63. **enforced:** applicate  
64. **flu:** influenza (*am.*)  
65. **hired:** preso a nolo  
66. **had 'gone savage':** si era inselvatichita  
67. **shedding:** spargendo  
68. **plucking:** spennando  
69. **to stew it:** per cuocerlo

pigeon. What do you think you are, a wild cat? Decent cats don't eat dirty birds. Only those old gypsies eat wild birds."

One night she begged help from a neighbour who had a car, and put into the car herself, the television set, the cat, bundles<sup>70</sup> of clothes, and the pram.<sup>71</sup> She was driven across London to a room in a street that was a slum<sup>72</sup> because it was waiting to be done up. The neighbour made a second trip to bring her bed and her mattress, which were tied to the roof of the car, a chest of drawers,<sup>73</sup> an old trunk,<sup>74</sup> saucepans.<sup>75</sup> It was in this way that she left the street in which she had lived for thirty years, nearly half her life.

She set up house again in one room. She was frightened to go near 'them' to re-establish pension rights and her identity, because of the arrears<sup>76</sup> of rent she had left behind, and because of the stolen television set. She started trading again, and the little room was soon spread, like her last, with a rainbow of colours and textures<sup>77</sup> and lace and sequins.<sup>78</sup> She cooked on a single gas ring and washed in the sink. There was no hot water unless it was boiled in saucepans. There were several old ladies and a family of five children in the house, which was condemned.

She was in the ground-floor back, with a window which opened on to a derelict garden, and her cat was happy in a hunting ground<sup>79</sup> that was a mile around this house where his mistress was so splendidly living. A canal ran close by, and in the dirty city-water were islands which a cat could reach by leaping<sup>80</sup> from moored<sup>81</sup> boat to boat. On the islands were rats and birds. There were pavements full of fat London pigeons. The cat was a fine hunter. He soon had his place in the hierarchies of the local cat population and did not have to fight

70. **bundles:** fagotti  
71. **pram:** carrozzella  
72. **slum:** stamberga  
73. **chest of drawers:** cassetiera  
74. **trunk:** baule  
75. **saucepans:** tegami  
76. **arrears:** arretrati

77. **textures:** consistenze (di tessuti)  
78. **sequins:** lustrini  
79. **hunting ground:** terreno di caccia  
80. **leaping:** balzando  
81. **moored:** ormeggiata

much to keep it. He was a strong male cat, and fathered many litters<sup>82</sup> of kittens.

In that place Hetty and he lived five happy years. She was trading well, for there were rich people close by to shed<sup>83</sup> what the poor needed to buy cheaply. She was not lonely for she made a quarrelling but satisfying friendship with a woman on the top floor, a widow like herself who did not see her children either. Hetty was sharp<sup>84</sup> with the five children, complaining about their noise and mess,<sup>85</sup> but she slipped them bits of money and sweets after telling their mother that "she was a fool to put herself out<sup>86</sup> for them, because they wouldn't appreciate it". She was living well, even without her pension. She sold the television set and gave herself and her friend upstairs some day-trips to the coast, and bought a small radio. She never read books or magazines. The truth was that she could not write or read, or only so badly it was no pleasure to her. Her cat was all reward<sup>87</sup> and no cost, for he fed himself, and continued to bring<sup>175</sup> in pigeons for her to cook and eat, for which in return he claimed<sup>88</sup> milk.

"Greedy<sup>89</sup> Tibby, you greedy thing, don't think I don't know, oh yes I do, you'll get sick eating those old pigeons, I do keep telling you that, don't I?"

At last the street was being done up.<sup>90</sup> No longer a uniform, long, disgraceful slum, houses were being bought by the middle-class people. While this meant more good warm clothes for trading – or begging, for she still could not resist the attraction of getting something for nothing by the use of her plaintive<sup>185</sup> inventive<sup>91</sup> tongue, her still flashing<sup>92</sup> handsome eyes – Hetty

82. **litters:** figliate  
83. **shed:** liberarsi di  
84. **sharp:** dura  
85. **mess:** disordine  
86. **put herself out (idiom.):** darsi tanto da fare  
87. **all reward:** pura gratificazione

88. **claimed:** reclamava  
89. **Greedy:** Ingordo  
90. **was being done up:** veniva rimessa a posto  
91. **plaintive inventive:** lamentosa fantasiosa  
92. **flashing:** scintillanti

knew, like her neighbours, that soon this house with its cargo<sup>93</sup> of poor people would be bought for improvement.

In the week Hetty was seventy years old came the notice that was the end of this little community. They had four weeks to find somewhere else to live.

Usually, the shortage<sup>94</sup> of housing being what it is in London – and everywhere else in the world, of course – these people would have had to scatter,<sup>95</sup> fending<sup>96</sup> for themselves. But the fate of this particular street was attracting attention, because a municipal election was pending.<sup>97</sup> Homelessness among the poor was finding a focus<sup>98</sup> in this street which was a perfect symbol of the whole area, and indeed the whole city, half of it being fine, converted,<sup>99</sup> tasteful<sup>100</sup> houses, full of people who spent a lot of money, and half being dying houses tenanted by people like Hetty.

As a result of speeches by councillors<sup>101</sup> and churchmen, local authorities found themselves unable to ignore the victims of this redevelopment. The people in the house Hetty was in were visited by a team consisting of an unemployment officer,<sup>102</sup> a social worker and a rehousing officer.<sup>103</sup> Hetty, a strong gaunt<sup>103</sup> old woman wearing a scarlet wool suit she had found among her cast-offs<sup>104</sup> that week, a black knitted<sup>105</sup> tea-cosy<sup>106</sup> on her head, and black buttoned Edwardian<sup>107</sup> boots too big for her, so that she had to shuffle,<sup>108</sup> invited them into her room. But although all were well used to the extremes of poverty, none wished to enter the place, but stood in the doorway and made her this offer: that she should be aided to get her pension –

93. **cargo:** carico94. **shortage:** scarsità95. **scatter:** sparpagliarsi96. **fending:** arrangiandosi97. **was pending:** incombeva98. **was finding a focus:** si stava concentrando99. **converted:** riadattate100. **tasteful:** di buon gusto101. **councillors:** consiglieri (membri del "town council", consiglio comunale)102. **rehousing officer:** funzionario addetto all'assegnazione di nuovi alloggi103. **gaunt:** macilenta104. **cast-offs:** scarti105. **knitted:** lavorata a maglia106. **tea-cosy:** copriteiera107. **Edwardian:** che appartengono al periodo in cui regnava Edward VII (1901-1910)108. **shuffle:** strascicare (i piedi)

why had she not claimed it long ago? – and that she, together with the four other old ladies in the houses should move to a Home<sup>109</sup> run by the Council out in the northern suburbs. All these women were used to, and enjoyed, lively London, and while they had no alternative but to agree, they fell into a saddened and sullen<sup>110</sup> state. Hetty agreed too. The last two winters had set her bones aching badly, and a cough was never far away. And while perhaps she was more of an urban soul even than the others, since she had walked up and down so many streets with her old perambulator loaded with<sup>111</sup> rags and laces, and since she knew so intimately London's texture<sup>112</sup> and taste, she minded least of all the idea of a new home 'among green fields'. There were, in fact, no fields near the promised Home, but for some reason all the old ladies had chosen to bring out this old song of a phrase,<sup>113</sup> as if it belonged to their situation, that of old women not far off death. "It will be nice to be near green fields again," they said to each other over cups of tea.

The housing officer came to make final arrangements. Hetty Pennefather was to move with the others in two weeks' time. The young man, sitting on the very edge of the only chair in the crammed room, because it was greasy<sup>114</sup> and he suspected it had fleas or worse in it, breathed as lightly as he could because of the appalling stink:<sup>115</sup> there was a lavatory in the house, but it had been out of order for three days, and it was just the other side of a thin wall. The whole house smelled.

The young man, who knew only too well the extent of the misery due to lack of housing, who knew how many old people abandoned by their children did not get the offer to spend their days being looked after by the authorities, could not help feeling that this wreck<sup>116</sup> of a human being could count herself lucky to get a place in his Home, even if it was – and he knew and deplored the fact – an institution in which the old were

109. **Home:** ricovero per anziani110. **sullen:** cupo111. **loaded with:** carica di112. **texture:** essenza113. **this old song of a phrase:** que-

sto vecchio ritornello

114. **greasy:** unto115. **appalling stink:** terribile fetore116. **wreck:** relitto

treated like naughty and dim-witted<sup>117</sup> children until they had the good fortune to die.

But just as he was telling Hetty that a van<sup>118</sup> would be coming to take her effects and those of the other four old ladies, and that she need not take anything more with her than her clothes "and perhaps a few photographs", he saw what he had thought was a heap<sup>119</sup> of multicoloured rags get up and put its ragged gingery-black paws<sup>120</sup> on the old woman's skirt. Which today was a cretonne curtain covered with pink and red roses that Hetty had pinned around her because she liked the pattern.<sup>121</sup>

"You can't take that cat with you," he said automatically. It was something he had to say often, and knowing what misery the statement caused, he usually softened it down. But he had been taken by surprise.

Tibby now looked like a mass of old wool that has been matting together<sup>122</sup> in dust and rain. One eye was permanently half-closed, because a muscle had been ripped<sup>123</sup> in a fight. One ear was vestigial.<sup>124</sup> And down a flank<sup>125</sup> was a hairless slope<sup>126</sup> with a thick scar on it. A cat-hating man had treated Tibby as he treated all cats, to a pellet<sup>127</sup> from his airgun. The resulting wound had taken two years to heal. And Tibby smelled.

No worse, however, than his mistress, who sat stiffly<sup>128</sup> still, bright-eyed with suspicion, hostile, watching the well-brushed tidy young man from the Council.

"How old is that beast?"

"Ten years, no, only eight years, he's a young cat about five years old," said Hetty, desperate.

"It looks as if you'd do him a favour to put him out of his misery," said the young man.

117. **dim-witted**: sciocchi

118. **van**: furgone

119. **heap**: mucchio

120. **gingery-black paws**: zampe nere-rossastre

121. **pattern**: disegno

122. **that has been matting together**: che si è aggrovigliata

123. **ripped**: lacerato

124. **One ear was vestigial**: Di un orecchio erano rimaste solo tracce

125. **flank**: fianco

126. **slope**: chiazza

127. **pellet**: pallottola

128. **stiffly**: rigidamente

When the official left, Hetty had agreed to everything. She was the only one of the old women with a cat. The others had budgerigars<sup>129</sup> or nothing. Budgies were allowed in the Home.

She made her plans, confided in the others, and when the van came for them and their clothes and photographs and budgies, she was not there, and they told lies for her. "Oh, we don't know where she can have gone, dear," the old women repeated again and again to the indifferent van-driver. "She was here last night, but she did say something about going to her daughter in Manchester." And off they went to die in the Home.<sup>285</sup>

Hetty knew that when houses have been emptied for redevelopment they may stay empty for months, even years. She intended to go on living in this one until the builders moved in.

It was a warm autumn. For the first time in her life she lived like her gipsy forbears,<sup>130</sup> and did not go to bed in a room in a house like respectable people. She spent several nights, with Tibby, sitting crouched<sup>131</sup> in a doorway of an empty house two doors from her own. She knew exactly when the police would come around, and where to hide herself in the bushes of the overgrown<sup>132</sup> shrubby<sup>133</sup> garden.

As she had expected, nothing happened in the house, and she moved back in. She smashed a back window-pane so that Tibby could move in and out without her having to unlock the front door for him, and without leaving a window suspiciously open. She moved to the top back room and left it every morning early, to spend the day in the streets with her pram and her rags. At night she kept a candle glimmering<sup>134</sup> low down on the floor. The lavatory was still out of order, so she used a pail<sup>135</sup> on the first floor instead, and secretly emptied it at night into the canal which in the day was full of pleasure boats and people fishing.

129. **budgerigars**: pappagallini

130. **forbears**: antenati

131. **crouched**: accovacciato

132. **overgrown**: coperto di vegetazione

133. **shrubby**: incolto (lett.: coperto di arbusti)

134. **glimmering**: che luccicava debolmente

135. **pail**: secchio

Tibby brought her several pigeons during that time.

310 "Oh, you are a clever puss, <sup>136</sup>Tibby, Tibby! Oh, you're clever, you are. You know how things are, don't you, you know how to get around and about."

The weather turned very cold; Christmas came and went. Hetty's cough came back, and she spent most of her time under piles of blankets and old clothes, dozing. <sup>137</sup>At night she watched the shadows of the candle flame on floor and ceiling — the window-frames fitted badly, <sup>138</sup>and there was a draught. <sup>139</sup>Twice tramps<sup>140</sup> spent the night in the bottom of the house and she heard them being moved on by the police. She had to go down to make sure the police had not blocked up the broken window the cat used, but they had not. A blackbird<sup>141</sup> had flown in and had battered itself to death<sup>142</sup> trying to get out. She plucked it, and roasted it over a fire made with bits of floor-board<sup>143</sup> in a baking-pan: the gas of course had been cut off. She had never eaten very much, and was not frightened that some dry bread and a bit of cheese was all that she had eaten during her sojourn under the heap of clothes. She was cold, but did not think about that much. Outside there was slushy<sup>144</sup> brown snow everywhere. She went back to her nest, thinking that soon the cold spell<sup>145</sup> would be over and she could get back to her trading. Tibby sometimes got into the pile with her, and she clutched<sup>146</sup> the warmth of him to her. "Oh, you clever cat, you clever old thing, looking after yourself, aren't you? That's right, my ducky, that's right, my lovely."

335 And then, just as she was moving about again, with snow gone off the ground for a time but winter only just begun, in

136. puss: miccio (*am.*)

137. dozing: sonnecchiando

138. the window-frames fitted badly: i serramenti non chiudevano bene

139. draught: corrente d'aria

140. tramps: vagabondi

141. blackbird: merlo

142. had battered itself to death: aveva sbattuto contro le pareti fino a morire

143. floorboard: tavola di pavimento

144. slushy: fangosa

145. cold spell: periodo freddo

146. clutched: stringeva forte

January, she saw a builder's van draw up outside, a couple of men unloading their gear.<sup>147</sup> They did not come into the house: they were to start work next day. By then Hetty, her cat, her pram piled with clothes and her two blankets, were gone. She also took a box of matches, a candle, an old saucepan and a fork and spoon, a tin-opener and a rat-trap. She had a horror of rats.

345 About two miles way, among the homes and gardens of amiable Hampstead, where live so many of the rich, the intelligent and the famous, stood three empty, very large houses. She had seen them on an occasion, a couple of years before, when she had taken a bus. This was a rare thing for her, because of the remarks and curious looks provoked by her mad clothes, and by her being able to appear at the same time such a tough<sup>148</sup> battling<sup>149</sup> old thing, and a naughty child. For the older she got, <sup>350</sup>this disreputable<sup>150</sup> tramp, the more there strengthened in her a quality of fierce, demanding<sup>151</sup> childishness. It was all too much of a mixture; she was uncomfortable to have near.

She was afraid that 'they' might have rebuilt the houses, but there they still stood, too tumbledown<sup>152</sup> and dangerous to be of much use to tramps, let alone the armies of London's homeless. There was no glass left anywhere. The flooring<sup>153</sup> at ground level was mostly gone, leaving small platforms and juts of plank-ing<sup>154</sup> over basements full of water. The ceilings were crumbling.<sup>155</sup> The roofs were going. The houses were like bombed buildings.

360 But in the cold dark of a late afternoon she pulled the pram up the broken stairs and moved cautiously around the frail boards of a second-floor room that had a great hole in it right down to the bottom of the house. Looking into it was like look-

147. unloading their gear: che scariavano i loro attrezzi

148. tough: tenace

149. battling: combattiva

150. disreputable: disdicevole

151. demanding: esigente

152. tumbledown: diroccate

153. flooring: pavimento

154. juts of planking: pezzi di tavole sporgenti

155. were crumbling: si stavano sgretolando

ing into a well.<sup>156</sup> She held a candle to examine the state of the walls, here more or less whole, and saw that rain and wind blowing in from the window would leave one corner dry. Here she made her home. A sycamore tree screened the gaping window<sup>157</sup> from the main road twenty yards away. Tibby, who was cramped<sup>158</sup> after making the journey under the clothes piled in the pram, bounded<sup>159</sup> down and out and vanished into neglected undergrowth<sup>160</sup> to catch his supper. He returned fed and pleased, and seemed happy to stay clutched in her hard thin old arms. She had come to watch for his return after hunting trips, because the warm purring bundle of bones and fur did seem to allay,<sup>161</sup> for a while, the permanent ache of cold in her bones.

Next day she sold her Edwardian boots for a few shillings — they were fashionable again — and bought a loaf and some bacon scraps.<sup>162</sup> In a corner of the ruins well away from the one she had made her own, she pulled up some floorboards, built a fire, and toasted bread and the bacon scraps. Tibby had brought in a pigeon, and she roasted that, but not very efficiently. She was afraid of the fire catching and the whole mass going up in flames; she was afraid too, of the smoke showing and attracting the police. She had to keep damping down<sup>163</sup> the fire, and so the bird was bloody and unappetizing and in the end Tibby got most of it. She felt confused, and discouraged, but thought it was because of the long stretch of winter still ahead of her before spring could come. In fact, she was ill. She made a couple of attempts to trade and earn money to feed herself before she acknowledged she was ill. She knew she was not yet dangerously ill, for she had been that in her life, and would have been able to recognize the cold listless<sup>164</sup> indifference of a

156. well: pozzo  
 157. A sycamore tree screened the gaping window: Un platano faceva da schermo alla finestra priva di vetri  
 158. cramped: anchilosato  
 159. bounded: balzò  
 160. undergrowth: sottobosco  
 161. allay: placare  
 162. scraps: avanzi  
 163. damping down: smorzare  
 164. listless: incurante

real last-ditch illness.<sup>165</sup> But all her bones ached, and her head ached, and she coughed more than she ever had. Yet she still did not think of herself as suffering particularly from the cold, even in that sleety<sup>166</sup> January weather. She had never, in all her life, lived in a properly heated place, had never known a really warm home, not even when she lived in the Council flats. Those flats had electric fires, and the family had never used them, for the sake of economy, except in very bad spells of cold. They piled clothes on to themselves, or went to bed early. But she did know that to keep herself from dying now she could not treat the cold with her usual indifference. She knew she must eat. In the comparatively dry corner of the windy room, away from the gaping window through which snow and sleet were drifting,<sup>167</sup> she made another nest — her last. She had found a piece of polythene sheeting<sup>168</sup> in the rubble,<sup>169</sup> and she laid that down first, so that the damp would not strike up. Then she spread her two blankets over that. Over them were heaped the mass of old clothes. She wished she had another piece of polythene to put on top, but she used sheets of newspaper instead. She heaved<sup>170</sup> herself into the middle of this, with a loaf of bread near to her hand. She dozed, and waited, and nibbled<sup>171</sup> bits of bread, and watched the snow drifting softly in. Tibby sat close to the old blue face that poked out of the pile and put up a paw to touch it. He miaowed and was restless, and then went out into the frosty<sup>173</sup> morning and brought in a pigeon. This the cat put, still struggling and fluttering a little, close to the old woman. But she was afraid to get out of the pile in which the heat was being made and kept with such difficulty. She really could not climb out long enough to pull up more splinters<sup>174</sup> of plank<sup>175</sup> from the floors, to make a fire, to pluck the pigeon, to roast it. She put out a cold hand to stroke the cat.

165. last-ditch illness: malattia finale  
 166. sleety: con nevischio  
 167. were drifting: si stavano accumulando  
 168. sheeting: foglio  
 169. rubble: macerie  
 170. heaved: si issò  
 171. nibbled: sbocconcello  
 172. poked out: sbucava  
 173. frosty: gelida  
 174. splinters: schegge  
 175. plank: tavola



"Tibby, you old thing, you brought it for me, then, did you? You did, did you? Come here, come in here..." But he did not want to get in with her. He miaowed again, pushed the bird closer to her. It was now limp<sup>176</sup> and dead.

"You have it, then. You eat it. I'm not hungry, thank you, Tibby."

But the carcass did not interest him. He had eaten a pigeon before bringing this one up to Hetty. He fed himself well. In spite of his matted fur, and his scars and his half-closed yellow eye, he was a strong, healthy cat.

At about four the next morning there were steps and voices downstairs. Hetty shot out<sup>177</sup> of the pile and crouched behind a fallen heap of plaster<sup>178</sup> and beams,<sup>179</sup> now covered with snow, at the end of the room near the window. She could see through the hole in the floorboards down to the first floor, which had collapsed entirely, and through it to the ground floor. She saw a man in a thick overcoat and muffler<sup>180</sup> and leather gloves holding a strong torch to illuminate a thin bundle of clothes lying on the floor. She saw that this bundle was a sleeping man or woman. She was afraid because she had not been aware of this other tenant of the ruin. Had he, or she, heard her talking to the cat? And where was the cat? If he wasn't careful he would be caught, and that would be the end of him! The man with a torch went off and came back with a second man. In the thick dark far below Hetty, was a small cave<sup>181</sup> of strong light, which was the torchlight. In this space of light two men bent to lift the bundle, which was the corpse of a man or a woman like Hetty. They carried it across the danger-traps<sup>182</sup> of fallen and rotting<sup>183</sup> boards that made gangplanks<sup>184</sup> over the water-filled basement. One man was holding the torch in the hand that supported the dead person's feet, and the light jogged<sup>185</sup> and lurched<sup>186</sup> over

176. **limp:** esanime  
 177. **shot out:** schizzò fuori  
 178. **plaster:** cemento  
 179. **beams:** travi  
 180. **muffler:** sciarpa pesante  
 181. **cave:** nicchia

182. **danger-traps:** trabocchetti  
 183. **rotting:** imputridite  
 184. **gangplanks:** passerelle di legno  
 185. **jogged:** sobbalzava  
 186. **lurched:** vacillava

trees and grasses: the corpse was being taken through the shrubberies<sup>187</sup> to a cat.

There are men in London who, between the hours of two and five in the morning, when the real citizens are asleep, who should not be disturbed by such unpleasantness as the corpses of the poor, make the rounds of all the empty, rotting houses they know about, to collect the dead, and to warn<sup>188</sup> the living<sup>465</sup> that they ought not to be there at all, inviting them to one of the official Homes or lodgings<sup>189</sup> for the homeless.

Hetty was too frightened to get back into her warm heap. She sat with the blankets pulled around her, and looked through gaps in the fabric<sup>190</sup> of the house, making out shapes<sup>470</sup> and boundaries<sup>191</sup> and holes and puddles<sup>192</sup> and mounds<sup>193</sup> of rubble, as her eyes, like her cat's, became accustomed to the dark.

She heard scuffling sounds<sup>194</sup> and they were rats. She had meant to set the trap, but the thought of her friend Tibby, who might catch his paw, had stopped her. She sat up until the morning light came in grey and cold, after nine. Now she did know herself to be very ill and in danger, for she had lost all the warmth she had huddled<sup>195</sup> into her bones under the rags. She shivered<sup>196</sup> violently. She was shaking herself apart with shivering. In between spasms she drooped<sup>197</sup> limp and exhausted. Through the ceiling above her – but it was not a ceiling, only a cobweb of slats<sup>198</sup> and planks – she could see into a dark cave which had been a garret,<sup>199</sup> and through the roof above that, the grey sky, teeming with incipient rain. The cat came<sup>485</sup> back from where he had been hiding, and sat crouched on her knees, keeping her stomach warm, while she thought out her

187. **shrubberies:** arbusti  
 188. **warn:** avvertire  
 189. **lodgings:** alloggi  
 190. **fabric:** struttura  
 191. **boundaries:** contorni  
 192. **puddles:** pozze  
 193. **mounds:** cumuli

194. **scuffling sounds:** scalpicci  
 195. **huddled:** immagazzinato  
 196. **shivered:** rabbrivì  
 197. **drooped:** si accasciò  
 198. **cobweb of slats:** ragnatela di assi  
 199. **garret:** soffitta

490 position.<sup>200</sup> These were her last clear thoughts. She told herself that she would not last out until spring unless she allowed 'them' to find her, and take her to hospital. After that, she would be taken to a Home.

But what would happen to Tibby, her poor cat? She rubbed the old beast's scruffy<sup>201</sup> head with the ball of her thumb and muttered: "Tibby, Tibby, they won't get you, no, you'll be all right, yes, I'll look after you."<sup>495</sup>

Towards midday, the sun oozed<sup>202</sup> yellow through miles of greasy grey cloud, and she staggered<sup>203</sup> down the rotting stairs, to the shops. Even in those London streets, where the extraordinary had become usual, people turned to stare at a tall gaunt woman, with a white face that had flaming red patches<sup>204</sup> on it, and blue compressed lips, and restless black eyes. She wore a tightly buttoned man's overcoat, torn brown woollen mittens,<sup>205</sup> and an old fur hood.<sup>206</sup> She pushed a pram loaded with old dresses and scraps of embroidery and torn jerseys<sup>207</sup> and shoes, all stirred<sup>208</sup> into a tight tangle,<sup>209</sup> and she kept pushing this pram up against people as they stood in queues, or gossiped, or stared into windows, and she muttered:<sup>210</sup> "Give me your old clothes, darling, give me your old pretties, give Hetty something, poor Hetty's hungry." A woman gave her a handful of small change, and Hetty bought a roll filled with tomato and lettuce. She did not dare go into a café, for even in her confused state she knew she would offend, and would probably be asked to leave. But she begged a cup of tea at a street stall, and when the hot sweet liquid flooded through her she felt she might survive the winter. She bought a carton of milk and pushed the pram back through the slushy snowy street to the ruins.

200. **thought out her position:** scelse una posizione  
 201. **scruffy:** arruffata  
 202. **oozed:** filtrò  
 203. **staggered:** barcollo  
 204. **patches:** chiazze  
 205. **mittens:** manopole  
 206. **hood:** cappuccio  
 207. **jerseys:** maglie  
 208. **stirred:** mescolati  
 209. **tangle:** groviglio  
 210. **muttered:** borbottò

Tibby was not there. She urinated down through the hole in the boards, muttering, "A nuisance,<sup>211</sup> that old tea," and wrapped herself<sup>212</sup> in a blanket and waited for the dark to come.<sup>520</sup>

Tibby came in later. He had blood on his foreleg. She had heard scuffling and she knew that he had fought a rat, or several, and had been bitten. She poured the milk into the tilted<sup>213</sup> saucepan and Tibby drank it all.

She spent the night with the animal held against her chilly bosom. They did not sleep, but dozed off and on. Tibby would normally be hunting, the night was his time, but he had stayed with the old woman now for three nights.

Early next morning they again heard the corpse-removers among the rubble on the ground floor, and saw the beams<sup>214</sup> of the torch moving on wet walls and collapsed beams. For a moment the torchlight was almost straight on Hetty, but no one came up: who could believe that a person could be desperate enough to climb those dangerous stairs, to trust those crumbling splintery<sup>215</sup> floors, and in the middle of winter?<sup>535</sup>

Hetty had now stopped thinking of herself as ill, of the degrees of her illness, of her danger – of the impossibility of her surviving. She had cancelled out in her mind the presence of winter and its lethal weather, and it was as if spring were nearly here. She knew that if it had been spring when she had had to leave the other house, she and the cat could have lived here for months and months, quite safely and comfortable. Because it seemed to her an impossible and even a silly thing that her life, or, rather, her death, could depend on something so arbitrary as builders starting work on a house in January rather than in April, she could not believe it: the fact would not stay in her mind. The day before she had been quite clear-headed. But today her thoughts were cloudy, and she talked and laughed aloud. Once she scrambled up<sup>216</sup> and rummaged<sup>217</sup> in her rags

211. **A nuisance:** Una seccatura  
 212. **wrapped herself:** si avvolse  
 213. **tilted:** inclinata  
 214. **beams:** traggi  
 215. **splintery:** pieno di schegge  
 216. **scrambled up:** si mise in piedi a fatica  
 217. **rummaged:** frugò

550 for an old Christmas card she had got four years before from her good daughter. In a hard harsh angry grumbling<sup>218</sup> voice she said to her four children that she needed a room of her own now that she was getting on. "I've been a good mother to you," she shouted to them before invisible witnesses<sup>219</sup> – former neighbours, welfare workers, a doctor. "I never let you want for anything,<sup>220</sup> never! When you were little you always had the best of everything! You can ask anybody, go on, ask them then!"

560 She was restless and made such a noise that Tibby left her and bounded on to the pram and crouched watching her. He was limping, and his foreleg was rusty with blood. The rat had bitten deep. When the daylight came, he left Hetty in a kind of a sleep, and went down into the garden where he saw a pigeon feeding on the edge of the pavement. The cat pounced on<sup>221</sup> the bird, dragged<sup>222</sup> it into the bushes,<sup>223</sup> and ate it all, without taking it up to his mistress. After he had finished eating, he stayed hidden, watching the passing people. He stared at them intently with his blazing<sup>224</sup> yellow eye, as if he were thinking, or planning. He did not go into the old ruin and up the crumbling wet stairs until late – it was as if he knew it was not worth while going at all.

570 He found Hetty, apparently asleep, wrapped loosely in a blanket, propped sitting in a corner.<sup>225</sup> Her head had fallen on her chest, and her quantities of white hair had escaped from a scarlet woollen cap, and concealed a face that was flushed a deceptive<sup>226</sup> pink – the flush of coma from cold. She was not yet dead, but she died that night. The rats came up the walls and along the planks and the cat fled down and away from them, limping still, into the bushes.

218. **grumbling:** lamentosa  
 219. **witnesses:** testimoni  
 220. **I never let you want for anything:** Non vi ho mai fatto mancare niente  
 221. **pounced on:** balzò su  
 222. **dragged:** trascinò  
 223. **bushes:** cespugli  
 224. **blazing:** fiammeggiante  
 225. **propped sitting in a corner:** seduta eretta in un angolo  
 226. **deceptive:** ingannevole

Hetty was not found for a couple of weeks. The weather changed to warm, and the man whose job it was to look for corpses was led up the dangerous stairs by the smell. There was something left of her, but not much.

As for the cat, he lingered<sup>227</sup> for two or three days in the thick shrubberies, watching the passing people and beyond them, the thundering traffic of the main road. Once a couple stopped to talk on the pavement, and the cat, seeing two pairs of legs, moved out and rubbed himself<sup>228</sup> against one of the legs. A hand came down and he was stroked and patted<sup>229</sup> for a little. Then the people went away.

590 The cat saw he would not find another home, and he moved off, nosing<sup>230</sup> and feeling his way from one garden to another, through empty houses finally into an old churchyard. This graveyard already had a couple of stray<sup>231</sup> cats in it, and he joined them. It was the beginning of a community of stray cats going wild. They killed birds, and the field mice that lived among the grasses, and they drank from puddles. Before winter had ended the cats had had a hard time of it from thirst, during the two long spells when the ground froze and there was snow and no puddles and the birds were hard to catch because the cats were so easy to see against the clean white. But on the whole they managed quite well. One of the cats was a female, and soon there were a swarm<sup>232</sup> of wild cats, as wild as if they did not live in the middle of a city surrounded by streets and houses. This was just one of half a dozen communities of wild cats living in that square mile of London.

Then an official came to trap the cats and take them away. Some of them escaped, hiding till it was safe to come back again. But Tibby was caught. Not only was he getting old and stiff – he still limped from the rat's bite – but he was friendly, and did not run away from the man, who had only to pick him up in his arms.

227. **lingered:** indugiò  
 228. **rubbed himself:** si strofinò  
 229. **stroked and patted:** accarezzato e coccolato  
 230. **nosling:** annusando  
 231. **stray:** randagi  
 232. **swarm:** colomia

“You’re an old soldier, aren’t you?” said the man. “A real tough one, a real old tramp.”

It is possible that the cat even thought that he might be finding another human friend and a home.

But it was not so. The haul<sup>233</sup> of wild cats that week numbered hundreds, and while if Tibby had been younger a home might have been found for him, since he was amiable, and wished to be liked by the human race, he was really too old, and smelly and battered.<sup>234</sup> So they gave him an injection and, as we say, “put him to sleep”.

615

620



Focus on the title. How does the image of an old woman with a cat strike you? What kind of life does the title suggest? What are your expectations about the story?

## STORY AND PLOT

(lines 1-73)

**1. Read and note down:**

- who Hetty was;
- what she died of;
- who Fred Pennefather was;
- at what age she died;
- how many children she had;
- where Hetty and her family lived.

**2. Complete the following chart with details about Hetty.**

<b>PHYSICAL FEATURES</b>	..... In her prime she attracted attention, was proud and handsome.
<b>PSYCHOLOGICAL OUTLINE</b>	..... ..... ..... ... she began a trade in buying and selling second-hand clothes. She did not have a shop of her own, but bought or begged clothes from householders, and sold these to stalls and the second-hand shops. She adored doing this. It was a passion. .....
<b>ODD BEHAVIOUR</b>	..... ..... [To trade second-hand clothes] she gave up her respectable job and forgot all about her love of trains and travellers.

233. haul: retata

234. battered: malconcio

- What was Fred Pennefather's attitude towards his wife?
- What attitude did Hetty's children take towards their mother?
- What was Hetty's reaction when people pointed at her as if she were a gypsy woman?

**3.** What did Hetty do after her husband's death?

- Underline the sentences that emphasise how fond Hetty was of her new job. Do you think that what she liked most of it was:
  - wandering around;
  - meeting other people;
  - being surrounded by the multiplicity of colours, forms and sounds of the city.

Give reasons by quoting from the text.

- What was the neighbours' reaction to Hetty's style of life?
- In what sense was Hetty no longer decent?
  - Because she did not do an honest job.
  - Because she did not care about her physical appearance.
  - Because she did not care about what people thought of her.

Give reasons for your answer.

(lines 74-139)

**4.** Note down:

- who Tibby was;
- what Hetty did with it;
- how it changed her life.

**5.** Complete the following chart with details about Tibby.

APPEARANCE	.....
------------	-------

CHARACTER	He was independent. .....
BEHAVIOUR	.....

- What was Hetty's attitude towards her cat? Give reasons by quoting from the text.
- What did Hetty decide to do after the ruling about keeping animals changed?

(lines 140-289)

**6.** Note down:

- where Hetty settled down; - how she lived;
- whom she made friends with;
- what happened in the week of her seventieth birthday.

**7.** Focus on the meeting between Hetty and the young housing officer. Does the young man appear:

- squeamish  hypocritical
- cold  afraid

Give reasons by quoting from the text.

- What is Hetty's attitude towards him and why?
- What is Hetty's final decision?
- Add details about Tibby to the chart in Activity 5.

(lines 290-353)

**8.** Summarise what Hetty did after the other old ladies left, pointing out:

- how she earned her living; - what she ate;
- how she warmed herself up in winter.
- What happened in January?

- What was Fred Pennefather's attitude towards his wife?
- What attitude did Hetty's children take towards their mother?
- What was Hetty's reaction when people pointed at her as if she were a gypsy woman?

**3. What did Hetty do after her husband's death?**

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(lines 290-353)

**8. Summarise what Hetty did after the other old ladies left, pointing out:**

- how she earned her living; - what she ate;
- how she warmed herself up in winter.
- What happened in January?

9. Underline the sentences that describe Hetty's personality as she grows old.
- Why do you think that Hetty was "uncomfortable to have near"?

(lines 354-579)

10. Note down:
- where Hetty settled down; - what her health was like;
  - how she protected herself from the cold;
  - how Tibby behaved towards his mistress.
11. Summarise what happened very early one morning and what the final consequences were.
12. What are Hetty's final thoughts and feelings about herself, her cat and her children?
13. Focus on the cat's behaviour. The cat:
- seems to sense that his mistress is ill;
  - behaves only by instinct;  tries to protect his mistress.
- Give reasons for your choice/s by quoting from the text.

(lines 580-622)

14. Note down:
- how Hetty's corpse ended up;
  - what Tibby did the first days after Hetty's death;
  - where he settled; - what finally happened to him.
- Do you think that:
    - there is a parallel between Hetty and Tibby's ways of living;
    - there is no similarity between Hetty and Tibby, because she is a human being and he is an animal;
    - Tibby took after his mistress's way of living.
- Give reasons for your answer.

## CHARACTERS, STRUCTURE AND THEME

Re-read lines 1-289.

According to the *Oxford Advanced Dictionary of Current English* a 'Gypsy' is a "member of a wandering, originally Asiatic people, who move about in caravans and make camps from time to time, and earn a living by collecting scrap material, horse-dealing, fortune-telling, basket-making, etc."

- Now consider the chart you have filled in about Hetty in *Story and Plot* and say how far she corresponds to the definition of 'gypsy' given above.
  - Are the aspects of behaviour which Hetty shares with a gypsy sufficient to justify other people's negative attitude towards her?
  - Focus on Hetty's job. Say why she chose it and how people reacted to her choice.
- Hetty's job is inextricably connected with her fondness for the intermingling of colours, shapes and sounds. Complete the following chart with quotations from the text describing Hetty's attitude towards her job and her way of dressing and of embellishing her houses.

LINES	HETTY'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS HER JOB	HETTY'S FONDNESS FOR SCRAPS OF MATERIAL
40	.....	She wore bright colours [...]
54-58	.....	.....
60-62	.....	.....

LINES	HETTY'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS HER JOB	HETTY'S FONDNESS FOR SCRAPS OF MATERIAL
66-70	She was enjoying herself too much, particularly the moving about the streets with her old perambulator, in which she crammed what she was buying or selling. She liked the gossiping, the bargaining, the wheedling from the wheedling from householders.	
143-145		She started trading again, and the little room was soon spread, like her last, with a rainbow of colours and textures and lace and sequins.
206-209		
254-256		

• Now look at the above quotations. Consider Hetty's fondness for collecting miscellaneous colourful materials and for selling them in the streets. Streets are, in fact, peopled by all sorts of people; an infinite variety of human beings – differently dressed, differently postured – walk along the streets thus showing a great variety of colours and sounds. Hetty's love for wandering around and moving among people in the streets suggests that she has a passionate, life-loving personality. Now say if, and why, you agree or disagree with the following statements.

- Hetty despises elegantly dressed people.
- Hetty has a sociable character.
- Hetty is a misanthropist.
- Hetty is proud of her job which she considers as respectable as any other.

- Hetty dresses with scraps of collected material because she cannot afford to buy a decent dress.
- Hetty is a self-aware woman who is satisfied with herself.

3. Do you think that Fred Pennefather, Hetty's husband, was a respectable and decent person?

- No, because he married a woman who had gypsy origins.
- No, because he did not have a dignified job.
- Yes, because he was a "steady" building worker, a good tenant, regularly paying the rent and keeping out of debt.
- Hetty is repeatedly referred to as an outsider. Almost at the beginning of the first section she is said to be "not respectable", at the end she is defined as "no longer decent". Find the two quotations in the text and describe what makes a person *respectable* and *decent*.
- Do you think that Hetty's children behaved respectfully and decently towards their mother? Give reasons for your answer.

4. Focus on Hetty's attitude:

- towards her cat;
- towards people like herself;
- towards other people (authorities, rich people, her children, etc.).

From the adjectives below, pick the two suitable ones for each of the points above, then note down the lines where the attitudes described by those adjectives come out in the text.

- Affectionate lines ... - Suspicious lines ...
- Supportive lines ... - Generous lines ...
- Self-defensive lines ... - Protective lines ...

Re-read lines 290-579.

The last period of Hetty's life is characterised by complete solitude and increasing poverty. She loses any interaction with people, indeed she tries to keep apart from human beings. Other people are referred to by the third person plural pronoun 'they', 'them'.



5. Who are "they" for Hetty?

- The authorities.
- Rich people.
- Anybody outside the life she lives with her cat.

• Whoever "they" are, "they" share

- indifference towards Hetty;
- a feeling of embarrassed unease towards the poverty of Hetty and people like her;
- contempt for Hetty.

You can provide your own suggestions giving reasons for your answer/s.

• How does Hetty feel towards 'them'?

6. Focus on Hetty's behaviour towards Tibby. It reveals that

- she prefers animals to human beings;
- she is a tender-hearted, generous woman;
- she has a protective attitude towards frail creatures;
- she is ready to sacrifice herself for those she loves;
- she likes cats because they are independent animals.

• Focus on Tibby's chart in *Story and Plot* and compare it to Hetty's charts you have filled in. Can you detect any similarity between Tibby and his mistress in terms of:

- outlook;
- life-style and attitudes;
- consideration on the part of "decent" people?

• Focus on Hetty's way of addressing her cat. She:

- mockingly reproaches her cat for the same reasons she knows people object to her;
- bitterly reproaches the cat because he gives her a lot of trouble;
- acknowledges in the cat the same attitude towards life she has;
- praises the cat when he provides her with food and reproaches him when he does not.

Give reasons for your answer/s by quoting from the text.

- How does Tibby respond to his mistress's attitude towards him? Below are some suggestions for your answer. Give an example from the text for each of them.  
affection    faithfulness    co-operation    help    care

Re-read lines 580-622.

7. Think again about Hetty's life after the death of her husband. It is possible to draw a parallel between Hetty's fate and that of her cat after his mistress's death. Complete the outline below with references to the lines.

	HETTY	TIBBY
Confused attempts at making way into a new yet unclear style of life	Lines ... 53	Lines 584-...
Definite settlement into a new way of living	Lines ... 290	Lines 593-606
Struggle for survival	Lines 290-535	Lines ...
Decline, and solitary death	Lines ...	Lines ...

• Now complete the following statements.

- Hetty was sociable at heart and did not fly from people unless they were the first to fly from her, similarly Tibby had become...
- As Hetty was neglected by both her children and everybody else because of her odd appearance and uncommon life-style, so Tibby...
- ..., similarly no one cared to get rid of a cat that was old, scarred, dirty and half-mutilated.

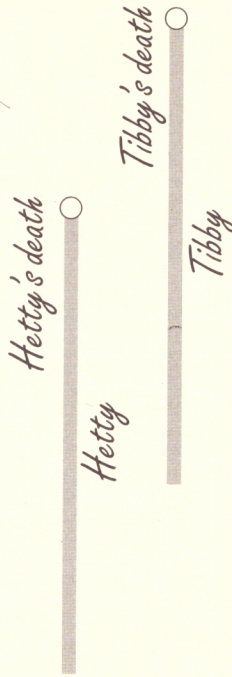
8. Consider how *An Old Woman and her Cat* is narrated. Who tells the story?

- Hetty.
- A narrator outside the story.
- A narrator inside the story.

• Answer the following questions.

- Does the narrator interfere with personal comments in the story?
- Does the narrator only report facts or does he also describe the psychology and feelings of the characters?
- Does the narrator reveal with what character he sympathises? How? Give examples by quoting from the text.

The story begins with a brief description of Hetty's early years to finally focus on her senility characterised by her attachment to the cat. It ends with the narration of Hetty and her cat's deaths. The story actually draws a parallel between the life of the old woman and that of her cat. Tibby's fate echoes his mistress's. Its structure can be represented by the following diagram:



9. Consider how the story develops. Does such a clear-cut plot development suggest that the story leaves any problems open? How?

10. On the basis of the exercises made so far what do you consider is/are the main themes of *An Old Woman and her Cat*?

- The indifference of young generations towards the older ones.
- Social banishment of the old and poor.
- Racial discrimination.
- The dignity of poor and disabled people.
- Social discrimination.
- Squeamishness for poverty and degradation.

Add your own suggestions, provided you give reasons.

## TEST YOUR COMPETENCE

- Fill in the blanks with the one correct word.
  - Fred Pennefather was Hetty's \_\_\_\_\_.
  - Hetty had \_\_\_\_\_ origins.
  - Hetty's job was to \_\_\_\_\_ second-hand clothes.
  - Tibby was \_\_\_\_\_ cat.
  - Hetty sometimes fed on the \_\_\_\_\_ which Tibby brought her.
  - When it was very cold in winter Hetty held Tibby close to her to \_\_\_\_\_ herself up.
  - In the last period of her life Hetty lived all \_\_\_\_\_ with her cat.
  - Hetty's \_\_\_\_\_ did not consider their mother a respectable person.
  - Hetty died from \_\_\_\_\_ from cold.
- Arrange the following events in the correct order.
  - Hetty begins to be seriously ill.
  - Hetty leaves her flat to go and live in a slum which is waiting to be done up.
  - Tibby is captured and put to sleep.
  - After her husband's death Hetty moves into a small flat where she lives alone.
  - Hetty is dreadfully frightened by the corpse removers and spends most part of the night in the cold.
  - Hetty decides not to go to the Home run by the Council in order to protect her cat.
  - Hetty dies.
  - The builders come to knock down the slums.
  - Hetty moves into one of three tumbledown houses which are to be re-built.
  - Hetty leaves her job as a saleswoman and begins to deal in second-hand clothes.

## PERSONAL RESPONSE

1. Think over the duties of children towards their parents and of political authorities towards citizens, particularly citizens in need. In what ways did both Hetty's children and the authorities fail towards her?
2. Imagine you come across an old beggar with his/her dog in the street. What is your first reaction?
  - You slip away if it is possible.
  - You give him/her some money.
  - You tell him/her to go and find a job.
  - You pretend not to have any money with you.
  - You look at the dog and smile at it.
  - Other answers.

Give reason/s for your reaction/s.

- What are your feelings towards old people like Hetty?

Pity/contempt/suspicion, etc.

Give reasons for your answer.

- How do you feel about the social problem of the poor and disabled? Do you think it is a primary/secondary/irrelevant, etc. problem? Why?
3. Do you agree with the statement that poor and disabled people are uncomfortable because they represent a threat to the good conscience of the so called "decent" people and, as a consequence, "they" try to ignore them? Give reasons for your answer.
    - How do you think this problem could be solved?

## FINAL ACTIVITIES

The four short stories you have read were written by 20th century female authors and all have 20th century women as protagonists. The exercises below will help you to focus on and summarise the topics common to these stories in terms of

- subject matter;
- narrative technique and structure;
- theme

which make them an interesting, meaningful and challenging sample of contemporary female narrative.

### SUBJECT MATTER

1. Which of the story/ies you have read focus/es most on the relationship of the woman with:
  - her husband;
  - her friends;
  - her family;
  - society;
- One of the elements mentioned above is present in all four stories. Which one?

The four stories depict four different marital situations.

2. Which one is not controversial? How is it broken and what are the consequences in the life of the female protagonist?
  - In *The Legacy* the role that society has established for women deeply affects the protagonist's relationship with her husband. What is the proper place that society seems to see for women in both *The Legacy* and *An Old Woman and her Cat*?
  - Hetty and Angela
    - subvert the traditional figure of the woman.
    - try to assert their personal dignity by going against the traditional female figure.