

1
Chemistry
Graham Swift

Your progress in this unit:

- explore how Graham Swift presents the thoughts and feelings of the characters
- develop your own interpretation of characters, relationships and events
- understand how Swift presents themes and ideas
- explore and analyse how Swift’s use of language and structure affects the reader
- practise and develop your written response skills.

I wanted to do math and physics, but my father made me do chemistry because he thought there would be no jobs for mathematicians.

We’ve all seen great actors and actresses who are missing a certain chemistry. And it’s not about getting along or not getting along.

The explosive story of chemistry is the story of the building blocks that make up our entire world - the elements. From fiery phosphorous to the pure untarnished lustre of gold and the dazzle of violent, violet potassium, everything is made of elements.

GETTING STARTED - THE STORY AND YOU

- 1 How many meanings of the word ‘chemistry’ can you think of? Work with a partner to jot down ideas.
- 2 Match these three quotations to the people who you think said them.



Jim-al-Khalili



Stephen Hawking



Johnny Galecki

STORY ESSENTIALS

Who



Major characters

The boy
His mother
His grandfather
Ralph, the new man in the mother’s life

Minor characters

Alec, the boy’s father, now dead
Vera, the boy’s grandmother, now dead

When and where



The events take place in the late 20th century. The story is set at a pond in a park, in the boy’s home and in Grandfather’s shed.

Sequence of events



- The young boy, his mother and his grandfather live together after the deaths of the boy’s father and his grandmother. The three of them are united in grief but have a reasonably contented life.
- This is disrupted by the arrival of Ralph, a physically big man who is clearly determined to get his way.
- Grandfather spends more and more time in his shed, engaged in his hobby – experimenting with chemicals.
- The boy hates Ralph so much that he takes some acid from the shed and means to throw it in Ralph’s face the next morning. This is prevented by Grandfather’s suicide.
- The story ends with the family preparing to move house. There is nowhere else for the boy to go.

Themes and ideas



- | | | |
|--------------|-------------------|------------------------------|
| • grief | • narrative voice | • ageing |
| • guilt | • relationships | • power |
| • loneliness | • hatred | • how some things do not end |



Contexts



Graham Swift was born in London in 1949. He wrote ‘Chemistry’ in 1982. As well as short stories, he has written a number of novels, including *Last Orders*, which won the Booker Prize in 1996 and was made into a film in 2001.

I often write about the moments of crisis in people’s lives where a space opens up and it’s strange because I think I identify with that quite strongly. But I am a very fortunate individual, I’m lucky I discovered what I wanted to do with my life and I am doing it, so I’m fulfilled and there aren’t many people who can say that.

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GETTING CLOSER - FOCUS ON DETAILS

The following activities will help you develop your skills from understanding to interpreting. As you work through this unit, you will also progress from exploring to analysing the story. Keep your own notes as you work through the activities. You will use them to bring together your written response to the story at the end of the unit.

What happens in the story?

We understand what happens in the story from the point of view of the boy, who is writing when he has grown up.

- 1

Choose four points in the story and write diary entries from the mother’s point of view. Include:

a

what has happened

b

what she feels about this.
- 2

Working in a small group, hot-seat the characters of Mother and Ralph and explore what happens in the story from their point of view. For example you might want to know what Ralph thinks about Grandfather’s protective attitude to the boy’s mother or what the mother thinks about her son’s behaviour.

Understanding the characters

The writer’s use of detail helps you to feel familiar with aspects of a character. This is something that you will need to learn to identify and comment on. Start with the facts in the story.

- 1

Read the first paragraph of the story. Then answer these questions.

a

What impression do you have of the relationships between Grandfather, Mother and the boy? What evidence can you find in the text to suggest this? Create a table to help organise your ideas. For example:

Statement	Evidence
They relied on each other.	
Grandfather dominated them.	<i>‘As if Grandfather were pulling us towards him on some invisible cord’</i>
They enjoyed each other’s company.	
They did not want other people to disturb them.	
They had become a self-contained unit.	

- b

The motor-launch is important in the first section. What do you think it might suggest about their relationships?

Chemistry is the science of change.





Listen to an extract from the story on Cambridge Elevate.

- 2
- The character of Ralph is introduced soon after this point in the story.
- a

Read the paragraph that begins ‘It was some months ...’. What impression of Ralph do you have from this paragraph?
- b

What do you learn about his relationships with the other characters?
- 3
- Complete a table to show what evidence you can find in the story to support these statements about Ralph. For example:

Ralph	
Statement	Evidence
He wants the boy to like him.	His offer to <i>get</i> the boy a new boat is described ‘as if pouncing on something’, which shows his <i>eagerness</i> .
He is short-tempered.	
He is used to getting his own way.	
He is greedy.	
He is determined to be the alpha male in the house.	

- 4
- Now create a similar table for the character of the mother. Think of five statements about her, and find evidence to support each one.

Where does the story happen?

The writer’s choice of a **setting** is important in any story. In this section you will consider how the writer makes the setting believable.

- 1
- Read this extract from the last paragraph in the story. What impression do you get of the pond in the park?

I had nowhere to go. I went down to the park and stood by the pond. Dead willow leaves floated on it. Beneath its surface was a bottle of acid and the wreck of my launch.

- 2
- Now look at the description of the pond at the start of the story. Write notes about:
- a


the layout
- b

the season
- c

the effect of the wind
- d

the privacy it allows.

- 3
- Do you think it is a pleasant place? Give reasons for your answer.



Key terms

setting: the description of the place in which a story is set.

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We would go even in the winter ...
when the leaves on the two willows
turned yellow and dropped and
the water froze your hands.

Themes and ideas

The early part of the story brings out the ideas of loss, grief and being mutually supportive. The self-reliance of the small family is disrupted by the arrival of a fourth character, Ralph, who quickly becomes dominant.

The boy feels that his way of life is now being threatened and that the quiet contentment of his family will be destroyed.

Working with a partner, discuss the following questions.

1 When the boat sinks, Grandfather says:

‘You must accept it – you can’t get it back – it’s the only way’

- a What do you think he is really talking about?
- b When she hears this, the mother’s face is described as ‘**very still and very white, as if she had seen something appalling**’. Why do you think she reacts like this?
- c The narrator describes the family as living ‘**within the scope of this sad symmetry**’. What do you think he means by this?

2 In the paragraph beginning ‘My father’s death was a far less remote event than my grandmother’s ...’, the narrator makes a distinction between adult and childish grief. What do you think are the distinctions?

PUTTING DETAILS TO USE

Now that you have looked at the story more closely, you can use the details you have discovered to build the important skills you will need to explore the key areas of character, setting and ideas.

Exploring the characters, setting, ideas and feelings

- 1 What evidence can you find to support the following interpretations of the boy’s personality?
- a He is lonely.
 - b He is imaginative.
 - c He feels his world is threatened.
 - d He loves his mother and wishes to protect her.
 - e He loves his grandfather and feels sorry for him.
 - f He is ruthless.
 - g He feels he can explain his grandfather’s suicide.

- 2 A student was asked to write about the character of Ralph. This is what they wrote:

Ralph is a natural destroyer: he successfully destroys the fragile family unit. His size alone makes him seem threatening. The narrator notes that 'he liked his food' and later that he was eating 'bigger and bigger meals'. He is also shown as something of a sexual predator, 'his big lurching frame almost enveloping' the mother. By the end of the story he has completely replaced the father, even wearing one of his old sweaters. He has managed to 'penetrate' what the boy describes as 'that old impregnable domain' of his family. It is no surprise that the mother and Ralph are planning to move to a new house and, presumably, to marry.

Using this interpretation of Ralph as an example, write three sentences in response to each of the following tasks:

- a Describe, with supporting details, what the character of the mother is like.
- b Describe, with supporting details, the grandfather's shed.
- c Describe some of the strong feelings and attitudes shown by the boy, for example his hatred of Ralph and his failure to understand death.

The narrator's standpoint

As you read the stories in *Telling Tales*, you will find that some are **third-person narratives** (see for example 'Odour of Chrysanthemums' in Unit 2). Usually, the person telling the story knows everything about every character, and can move from one setting to another whenever they wish to.

'Chemistry' is a **first-person narrative**. The narrator is an adult, possibly even an old man, looking back on the events of his childhood and giving a frank and honest insight into what he thought and felt when he was a young boy. The reader sees the events through the narrator's eyes. The other characters might have a different **viewpoint** and a completely different way of thinking about what happened.



Learning checkpoint

Select three quotations from the text that helped you to form an opinion of one of the following:

- a character
- the setting for the story
- a feeling or attitude.

Write a sentence to explain how each of the quotations supports your interpretation.



Watch an expert discuss key themes and ideas in the story on Cambridge Elevate.



Key terms

third-person narrative: an account of events using 'he', 'she' or 'they', rather than 'I' or 'we'.

first-person narrative: an account of events written from a personal point of view (so using 'I' or 'we' rather than 'he', 'she' or 'they').

viewpoint: the position from which a character sees things.

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What the characters say and do

In order to make a character believable for the reader, the writer has to give enough information about what the character says and does.

Look at this extract from the opening paragraph of the story:

For some reason it was always Grandfather, never I, who went to the far side. When he reached his station I would hear his ‘Ready!’ across the water. A puff of vapour would rise from his lips like the smoke from a muffled pistol. And I would release the launch ... As it moved it seemed that it followed an actual existing line between Grandfather, myself and Mother, as if Grandfather were pulling us towards him on some invisible cord, and that he had to do this to prove we were not beyond his reach. When the boat drew near him he would crouch on his haunches. His hands – which I knew were knotted, veiny and mottled from an accident in one of his chemical experiments – would reach out, grasp it and set it on its return.


In this paragraph, Swift creates an impression of the characters of both the boy and his grandfather, and of the relationship between the three characters.

- 1 Working in a pair, **annotate** a copy of these lines to show how Swift has used language to suggest the passage is written by an individual. Think about:
- a

how the family is presented as a self-contained unit
- b

the physical description of Grandfather’s hands (what effect does this have on the reader?)
- c

words or phrases that suggest Grandfather wants to be the most important person in the family.



Key terms

annotate: to write notes on a text to highlight details.

dialogue: where two or more characters are speaking to each other.



A puff of vapour would rise from his lips like the smoke from a muffled pistol.

- 2 Make a copy of the following table. How does what Grandfather says reveal aspects of his feelings and attitudes? The first point has been completed for you as an example.

Quotation	Grandfather’s feelings and attitudes
‘You must accept it – you can’t get it back – it’s the only way’	Grandfather is still feeling the loss of his wife and is trying to accept it. He understands that death must be accepted as being a part of life.
‘Leave her alone? What do you know about being left alone?’	
‘You don’t make curry any more, the way you did for Alec, the way Vera taught you.’	
‘I thought you would come.’	
‘Anything can change. Even gold can change.’	
‘They change. But the elements don’t change.’	
‘Laurel water. Prussic acid. Not for drinking.’	

How the characters relate to each other

Writers may also use **dialogue** to give readers an understanding of characters and relationships. The way people speak to each other can reveal a lot about themselves and the way they see others.

Swift puts some ideas and attitudes into his characters’ mouths that indicate their own attitudes and feelings, for example their attitudes to Grandfather. He does this by allowing the boy to witness these incidents.

- 1 With a partner, explain what you think each of the following quotations reveals about the other characters’ attitudes towards Grandfather. One quotation has already been completed as an example.

Quotation about Grandfather	What this reveals about the speaker’s feelings and attitudes towards him
Ralph: ‘Why don’t you leave her alone?!’	
Ralph: ‘For Christ’s sake we’re not waiting all night for him to finish! Get the pudding!’	
Mother: ‘You’re ruining our meal – do you want to take yours out to your shed?!’	
Mother: ‘Grandpa was old and ill, he wouldn’t have lived much longer anyway.’	She is showing that she is glad, or at least relieved, that he is dead and treats his death as being of little consequence.
Mother: ‘There – isn’t that lovely?’	

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Exploring themes and ideas

There are many references to loss, grief and change in the story. The narrator makes a distinction between the grief experienced by a child and that experienced by an adult, and tries to understand how people can change.

- 1 Explore ideas about how important the loss of Vera is to Grandfather by answering the following questions.

a What does he do and what does he refuse to do?

b In what ways does Grandfather choose to remember her?

c Why do you think these are significant?
- 2 What impression do you get of the way the boy's mother reacts to the loss of her husband, Alec? Think about:

a what she says and does

b what she does **not** do

c why these things have a significance in the story (for example the food and the sweater).
- 3 Swift uses ghosts as a part of the story. The ghosts of the boy's father and grandfather both appear to him.

a What do you think is important about what his father tells the boy?

b What does this suggest to the reader about how the boy now views his mother?

c Why do you think Swift repeats the image of the pools of water?

d Why does what happens when the boy wakes up make the placing of this ghostly visitation important at this point in the story?
- 4 The following examples of students' work show how you can develop your **understanding** into **interpretation** to **explore** other possible meanings. What differences do you notice in the three answers, in response to the following question?

What is the significance of the father's ghost?

He appears to the boy dripping wet and with seaweed on his shoulders because the boy thinks he has stayed on the bottom of the Irish Sea.

Shows understanding

The boy sees his father's ghost because he is so upset with his mother and Ralph. He does not usually go to sleep before he sees Grandfather's light is off because he feels that he is watching over him. The ghost then appears and accuses his mother of causing the boat to sink and his plane to crash. It is all the mother's fault.

Shows interpretation

The appearance of the father's ghost shows the boy's innocence and lack of understanding of death: the salt and seaweed indicate that the boy believed his father, like his grandmother, was 'at the bottom of the Irish Sea' and wanted to know 'when he would return'. That he then suggests that perhaps he knows his father would not return shows he is gradually beginning to understand death. His father's ghost clearly shows that on some level the boy has understood that the boat's sinking is linked to the breakdown of the family. The ghost links the boat and the plane crash and the repeated 'Don't you believe me?' may be read as being a plea for revenge. The reader is left wondering what the 'something' is that was pulling him towards the door: does he have only a brief time or is he now moving from the Irish Sea to somewhere else or nowhere?

Shows exploration

Analysing language

When you analyse a story, you should look closely at different parts of the story to see how they are connected. These may form a pattern. Often, close study of the language may reveal details of the author’s meanings and purposes that on a first reading you may not have noticed. These details are usually called **implications**.

What someone says can be taken as a fact or as a sign of something more – a feeling, an attitude or a personality trait. **Implied meaning** can be different from what is apparently being said.

Writers choose their words to convey a range of things – usually ideas, feelings and attitudes. Sometimes even a short and simple sentence can show how a writer has chosen words carefully.

- 1 Mother says to Grandfather: ‘**You’re ruining our meal – do you want to take yours out to your shed?!**’ Rank the following statements according to how close you think they are to what the mother means in this sentence, giving reasons for your decisions:
- a She does not want to wait for her pudding.

b She wants to get rid of Grandfather so she can enjoy the meal with Ralph.

c She does not want the crumble to go cold.

d She wants to tell Grandfather that she now values Ralph more than him.

e She thinks she should do what Ralph wants her to do.

Sometimes language is used to give us **facts** and an accurate description of something. At other times it is used just to create an **impression**.

- 2 Writers can sometimes pack a lot of meaning into a very short phrase, for example when Swift writes about Ralph:

You see, he liked his food.

This might appear a strange excuse for his ordering of the pudding but Swift highlights the point by giving the sentence a paragraph to itself.

- a Why do you think Swift uses the phrase ‘You see’?

b What else might Ralph’s liking of food imply?

c What other moments in the story associate Ralph with food?

d Why do you think Swift includes them?

It is important that you develop your skills in analysing the language used by the writer. The purpose of this is to gather together details to see if you can identify patterns in them, or understand how they may relate to each other. For example a physical detail may represent something more than what it literally is.

- 3 Discuss the following quotations from the story about the weather and the natural world. Make notes to help you answer the following question: **How might the weather and the natural world be related to what different characters are feeling?**

When the wind blew, little waves travelled across it and slapped the paved edges.

The leaves on the two willows turned yellow and dropped.

the evergreen shrubs which filled our garden were defying the onset of autumn. Only the cherry-laurel bushes were partly denuded

All that autumn was exceptionally cold.

rain was dashing against the window as if the house were plunging under water.

The heavy rain and the tossing branches of a rowan tree obscured my view.

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It was a brilliant, crisp late November day and the leaves on the rowan tree were all gold.

They tidied the overgrown parts of the garden and clipped back the trees.

The air was very cold.

Symbolism

Sometimes a writer uses words or actions in a way that gives them a wider meaning. In this story, we can find **symbolism** in the study and practice of chemistry. For example the following extract by a student describes how the apple crumble is used as a symbol:

The apple crumble is ‘seething’, which is exactly what the relationships in the house are like at that moment. Not only is everyone angry or upset or both, but their emotions are about to overflow, just like the ‘burnt sugar and apple juice’.

- 1 Discuss and make notes about the following questions.
- a Grandfather says: ‘**You don’t make things in chemistry - you change them. Anything can change.**’ Do you think he is speaking about chemistry or relationships?
 - b Why does Grandfather say, ‘**Then we’d take something that wasn’t gold at all and cover it with this changed gold so it looked as if it was all gold - but it wasn’t.**’?
 - c Why does Grandfather not put the watch chain into the beaker?
 - d What does the boy mean when he thinks ‘**how suicide can be murder and how things don’t end**’?
 - e In the final paragraph, the boy thinks ‘**But though things change they aren’t destroyed**’. What do you think is the significance of this?

But though things change
they aren’t destroyed.



Exploring a key moment in the story

The moment when the ambulance arrives to take away the dead grandfather is an important point in the story. The boy watches from a bedroom window as Ralph appears outside the house and seems to be supervising the paramedics.

- 1 Re-read the paragraph beginning ‘And then it was almost light ...’ and then make notes on:
- a

 how the weather contributes to the drama of what is happening
- b

 how the boy’s view is obscured so he does not understand what is happening
- c

 how Ralph appears to be an almost comic figure
- d

 how Ralph also appears to have some authority
- e

 the boy’s reaction when he realises what is happening
- f

 the importance of the smell of whisky
- g

 the mother’s promise of an explanation.

Analysing structure

- 1 The story begins and ends at the pond. Why do you think Swift does this?
- Working in a small group, rank the following statements according to how well you think they answer this question. Explain your decisions.

The story begins and ends at the pond to:

- a

 suggest that the boy is lonely
- b

 remind the reader of the bottle of acid and the boy’s dislike of Ralph
- c

 show that Graham Swift likes to include water in his stories
- d

 remind the reader of the lost boat and the changes that have happened in the family
- e

 show that the boy wishes to return to somewhere where he felt loved
- f

 show that things don’t change, even after death.


2 Re-read the last paragraph of the story. Then answer these questions.

a

 What details can you find that create a sad **atmosphere**?


b

 In what ways does the description of the grandfather link to the opening of the story?

 **Key terms**

symbolism: the use of one thing to represent another.

atmosphere: the feeling created by a writer’s description of a setting.

 **Learning checkpoint**

Use what you have learnt so far in this unit to answer the following questions.

1 Annotate the last two sentences to explore their meaning. What do you think Swift wants the reader to learn from these sentences?

He was smiling and I knew: the launch was still travelling over to him, unstoppable, unsinkable, along that invisible line. And his hands, his acid-marked hands, would reach out to receive it.

2 Which of the following best describes how you feel about the ending of the story?

sad

hopeful

celebratory

uplifting

curious

sentimental

3 Why do you think the story is called ‘Chemistry’?

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GETTING IT INTO WRITING

As you have worked through this unit, you have built on your understanding by analysing and interpreting the text. You will now have the opportunity to develop your ideas into a written response. Remember: in your examination, you will be asked to write about **two** stories, but here you will focus on just one.

- 1 Use your exploration of the story, and the notes you have taken, to write a response of no more than 300 words to the following question:

How does Swift present the relationships between characters in ‘Chemistry’?

Write about:

- how Swift presents the relationship between two characters in the story
- how Swift uses the characters to explore the themes of grief and change.

When writing your response to this question, remember to:

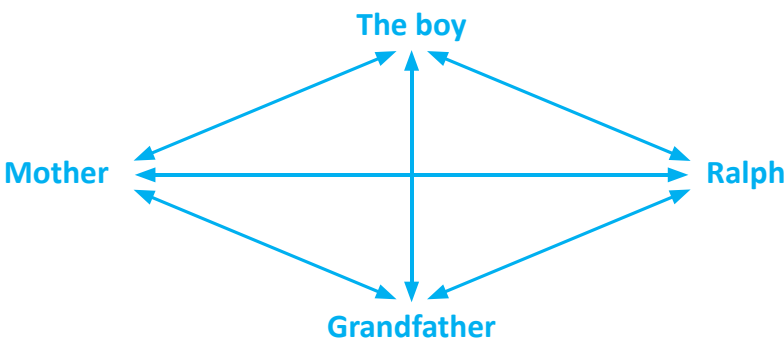
- include details of how the story develops
- use short quotations to support your ideas
- explore implied meanings (the ideas behind the words)
- identify different viewpoints
- give your own personal response.



Complete this assignment on Cambridge Elevate.

Structuring your response

Using the work you have already done in this unit as a starting point, write about **four** relationships in the story. You should aim to write at least one paragraph about each of these relationships.



It may help if you think of the question as a ‘What’ and a ‘How’ – **What** is the story about? **How** is it written?

The ‘What’ is the feelings and attitudes in the story, for example grief and change.

The ‘How’ is the writer’s way of conveying those things through language and use of language devices.



Often I could not sleep until ... I knew that Grandfather had shuffled back to the house and slipped in, like a stray cat

For the **first** part, you will need to:

- bring together the notes you made earlier in this unit to illustrate the feelings of the boy, his mother and his grandfather towards their losses
- illustrate how these feelings change over the course of the story
- examine their relationships in detail – for example how things in the family change or stay the same and how the characters feel at the end of the story.

For the **second** part, you will need to show how Swift uses his craft as a writer through language and symbolism to:

- show the characters’ feelings and attitudes
- represent ideas about how people respond to, and try to cope with, grief.

Improving your response

- 1 Here are some extracts from students’ responses to the question about the relationships in the story. Work with a partner to decide which extracts have gone beyond simple comments about the story to a convincing exploration of language or ideas.

Student A

The boy clearly does not like Ralph as he is taking his father’s place. He does not want Ralph to buy him a new boat and says no several times to try to show

Ralph that he will never accept him. Later in the story he wants to ‘spoil his face’ so that his mother ‘would no longer want him’.

Student B

Swift shows that the boy feels great sympathy for his grandfather’s situation. The boy is aware that the shed provides the grandfather with ‘a sealed-off world’, which shows that the grandfather is in need of a place where he can feel some security and ‘solace’, not just from the loss of his wife but also from the potential loss of his daughter and the quiet happiness they had shared when he provided for her. Now the boy is sorry that his grandfather looks like ‘some torpid captive animal’ and slips into the house ‘like a stray cat’. In the boy’s eyes, Grandfather is becoming a poor, hunted animal.

Student C

The relationship between the mother and Ralph develops throughout the story. The first important moment is when she gives Ralph the apple-crumble and says to Grandfather, ‘You’re ruining our meal’. She has sided with Ralph because she is making Grandfather leave the house to eat on his own. She is making stews for Ralph and not curries for the grandfather, so she is obviously showing that she now feels more for Ralph than for Grandfather.

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Student D

The boy in the story does not like his mother’s new boyfriend, Ralph, and plans to throw acid in his face so his mother will not want him anymore. His plan is stopped when his grandfather commits suicide by drinking a poison that he has made in his shed.

Student E

Swift implies that the narrator seemed to have been satisfied with the ‘sad symmetry’ of grief in which he, his mother and his grandfather had found themselves. The narrator writes that they lived ‘quietly, calmly, even contentedly’. Here the word ‘even’ appears to suggest that this was something of a surprise. The same is true of his judgement that for a year ‘we were really quite happy’. Again the word ‘quite’ indicates that whatever happiness was to be had in their mutual relationships was something of a small triumph.

Student F


Perhaps the most intriguing relationship in the story is that of the narrator and his younger self. Swift emphasises that the narrator was only ten years old at the time, but some of the boy’s thoughts and feelings seem to be too mature for one so young. For example the narrator reveals that he wanted to tell the policemen and officials from the coroner’s court ‘a thousand things’ – clearly this is a hyperbolic response. He continues that he wanted to explain ‘how suicide can be murder

and how things don’t end’. This level of subtlety is unlikely in one so young, however sensitive and intelligent, and seems to be the narrator projecting his later feelings on his ten-year-old self. The clue may be in the statement that his mother, alive at the time of writing, ‘has been trying to explain, or to avoid explaining’ since the suicide.

- 2 Having thought about these extracts, go back to your own response. What could you do to improve it?

GETTING FURTHER

- 1 Imagine you are going to adapt the story into a comic-strip format. Think about the following questions.
 - a If you were only allowed ten images, which would you choose?
 - b What captions or speech would you include?
 - c Now take this a stage further and **storyboard** a trailer for a television drama adaptation of the story.
- 2 Script or improvise a role-playing scene in which the boy, now an old man, is questioned about his childhood by a psychiatrist.

Key terms

storyboard: to make a sequence of drawings that show the different scenes in a story.

And his hands, his acid-
marked hands, would
reach out to receive it.

