

GCSE English Language

AQA Paper 1 Explorations in Creative Reading and Writing

*This extract is an entire short story called 'Death of a Hoarder' about a woman who suffers from hoarding.*

Pinned under the mountain of garbage, the small body squirmed, writhed, and then lay still. A leg poked out beneath a rug, and the fingers of a limp hand could be seen protruding from between the pages of a 1989 edition of a London A-Z. Somewhere outside, a child was laughing and clapping, and a car drove past with music blaring and the windows rolled down. Inside the room the air was stale. Most surfaces were grey from dust; a veneer of disgust coated everything like a sheath of repugnant grot. Not only had the front door not been opened for a month, but the back door had now been wedged shut as a tower of magazines tipped over when Cecilia, the proud owner of this hovel, had tried to add three more copies of *Country Living* to its summit- crushing herself and blocking the back door.

9

After the fire (in which she lost her husband, her cat, and every possession in the world short of the nightdress on her back) Cecilia moved away from her childhood home of Rye. The open fields, the air, the light- all of it mocked her. The more she saw beauty, the more she felt misery, and the more pronounced her grief became. Her blonde hair turned to ash, and her face creased into an axe with her nose and chin forming a lethal point. No smiles, no laughter, no joy. So she left, and brought her misery with her. She moved to a city and slipped into anonymity. Cecilia left no number for people to contact her, and no forwarding address...she quietly and unobtrusively erased herself from society.

17

At first, Cecilia convinced herself she was rebuilding a life. She began to find scraps of joy in collecting things, beginning with cuttings from newspapers about the royal family. Their refined clothes shimmered off the pages, and Cecilia felt warmed by their smiles as she sorted them into folders. Weddings, coronations, state visits, births, deaths: she collected them without discrimination. Using the payout from her husband's life insurance, Cecilia then started to pay for magazine subscriptions. Monthly, fortnightly, weekly- each day she would feel a connection with the outside world when her letterbox announced their arrival with a proud clang.

25

Eventually, Cecilia caved and bought herself a television. Before the advent of the internet, people had to leave the house to go shopping; fortunately for Cecilia, this was the 90s, and she took herself and her clubcard to her local Tesco. Just inside the door there were shiny black television sets to greet the customers; they stopped their trolleys and pointed- staring at this perplexing discovery of squat black alien invaders in their grocers.

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Picking the smallest set on offer, Cecilia balanced the box on her shopping trolley and then trundled home. Pausing to consider her limited options on space, she eventually unpacked it in the corner of her living room. Glasses perched on the end of her nose (now years out of date for

the correct prescription) Cecilia picked out a space to sit down on her sofa, and popped batteries into the remote control. Full technicolour life roared into her poky dark room. Soon, her life had shape and meaning- in the form of a programming schedule. Breakfast News on BBC1, and stay there for Kilroy. Switch over for Shortland Street, then switch back for Neighbours, then switch again for Jessica Fletcher and Murder She Wrote, then down more detective work with Columbo and Ironside, before starting her evening soaps.

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Cecilia would have stuck with terrestrial television if she hadn't heard that nice lady telling her friend about the shopping channels when Cecilia had been picking out her microwave meals in the supermarket.

43

Now her postbox clanged all the time. When the inevitable exhaustion of her savings occurred, Cecilia released some equity from the house. 'Can't take it with you,' she reasoned.

46

Her one bedroom house had been conquered by trash. Folded food cartoons reigned over the floorspace in the kitchen, and bags of kitchen appliances ruled over the worktops. Every step on the staircase had its own little cluster of dictators: a hair brush, a book, a pack of rollerball pens. Cecilia stopped sleeping on her bed, as that was where the cosmetic were King. Packs of make up collections balanced against each other, unopened, unused, and utterly necessary. Her bathroom had a path to the toilet, but the bath had been seized by a bundles of toilet rolls, and piles of bath towels, and rolls of wallpaper, and spools of tape, and bunches of keys. The sink overflowed, not with water, but paper cups- still shrink-wrapped and with a thick wet layer of dust on top. Above in the loft, Cecilia had surrendered to the inevitable occupation of the newspapers and a small platoon of mice; the entire space now formed part of a no go zone.

57

The mountain that pinned Cecilia's small and lifeless body to the floor had grown from a pile, to a mound, to a hill, to a mountain- and now a tumulus. Three decades of the decrepit debris of a life. A life measured out in figures: a house worth two hundred thousand pounds, debts of thirty thousand pounds, one dead body, no mourners.

61