
The Lamp at Noon by Sinclair Ross
Question Sheet **Answer Key**

In “The Lamp at Noon,” Sinclair Ross presents a disturbing picture of an unrelenting dust storm in the prairies during the Great Depression. Ross’s stories often explore the impact of setting on the human spirit. In this short story, weather plays an important role in the characters’ shifting moods.

Before you read the text, consider the questions you will have to answer. Next, read the story and analyse it, but please **do not write on the handout** – unless you first print off your own copy.

Before Reading: Symbolism

1. What could the title of this story mean if interpreted as a symbol?

The title is symbolic of a need for light and an inability to see what should be easily visible. It should be easy to see things at noon; no lamp should be needed.

During Reading: Elements and Devices

2. What **mood** is established in the first paragraph?
Gloomy, oppressive, isolated, lonely, barren, sombre
3. How is the wind depicted in the first paragraphs of the story?
Demented, forceful, unrelenting – the main antagonist
4. How is the setting of “The Lamp at Noon” related to the story’s central conflict and theme? Provide evidence from the story to support your views. How would the story change if the setting was different?

Central Conflict: Person vs. Nature - description of wind and landscape indicate difficulty of surviving amidst the elements

Topics for Theme Consideration: hope / loss / personal challenges / marital conflict / economic hardship / communication breakdown / stress and mental instability / loneliness of rural living / Great Depression / Dust Bowl / nature’s destructive potential / lack of foresight / being blinded by a ‘dream’

Theme Example: If your vision is clouded, you cannot see what is real and true.

Rationale for Theme Example: The setting is related to the conflict and theme because the lamp and the dust are metaphors related to Paul and Ellen’s inability to see what is right in front of them.

TIME – If set in present day, women would not be thought of as fearful and weak (1), and men would not be as easily chastised for accepting help during a difficult time. This would reduce or even eliminate the conflict between Paul and Ellen. If the story were not set during the Great Depression, the general sense of suffering and having little to eat would likely not apply for this couple.

PLACE – If the setting were moved to an Ontario farm, for example, the dust would no longer be a factor, and Ellen might be happier on the farm, and Paul might be more successful with his crops.

MOOD – If the mood were less gloomy and oppressive, the characters may also feel less gloomy and oppressed, and the conflict would be mitigated or eliminated. Ellen seems to find solace in the idea of the storm abating (7), so if the storm had never taken place, she would not have felt the need to run from it.

WEATHER – See mood above

SOCIAL CONDITIONS – In the 1930s, men were expected to provide and women were expected to be emotional and weak. Paul could not turn to Ellen’s parents for help, and Ellen was caught up believing she needed to obey and stay with her husband. Even though she fled near the end, at the conclusion of the story she is again subservient. Today, this would likely not be the case. Divorce is now extremely common and men are better able to put aside their pride. Women are independent and able to support themselves; and men, in general, no longer feel the strain of being a sole provider.

5. Explain how **character vs. nature** features as a prominent conflict in this story.

Paul is battling nature via the storm and the land. He has been battling the land for quite some time and remains determined to win. He is also willing to fight the storm.

Ellen is battling the “deepening ruin of the storm” (1) with the baby. She does not want to fight, and nature wins.

“Demented wind keening past the house” (1)

“the deepening ruin of the storm” (1)

“in the dust-filled air he might contract pneumonia” (1)

“There were two winds: the wind in flight, and the wind that pursued” (1)

“furious the other wind shook the walls” (2)

6. **Character vs. character** is another important conflict in the story. Fill out the chart below to analyse the conflict between Paul and Ellen.

	View on living / working on the farm	Example from text with page #	View on living / working in the city	Example from text with page #
Paul	Home Independence Identity	“You’ll see it come back. There’s good wheat in it yet” (3) “This is where I belong. I can’t do anything else” (3) “For so deep were his instincts of loyalty to the land that still, even with images of betrayal stark upon his mind, his concern was how to withstand her, how to go on again and justify himself” (6)	Oppressive Hopeless A sign of defeat	“Even as a desert it’s better than sweeping out your father’s store and running his errands” (2)
Ellen	Oppressive Dangerous Hopeless	“Are you blind? Thistles and tumbleweeds – It’s a desert. You won’t have straw this fall. You won’t be able to feed a cow or a chicken” (2) “It’s the hopelessness – going on – watching the land blow away” (3)	Home Safety Security Carefree	“At least we’ll get enough to eat and wear when you’re sweeping out his store” (3) “anything would be better than this” (3) “I’m still young – I wasn’t brought up this way” (4)

7. Who do you think is correct? Why?

Answers will vary. Justification and examples from text must be included in response.

8. Using evidence from the text, identify the following **five (5) literary devices** within the story and explain the effect they have.

Answers will vary. May include those shown below. Effects are based on individual reader response, which is influenced by reader experience in life, from other texts, etc.

Literary Device	Evidence (direct quotation with page #)	Effect
Personification	"Demented wind fled keening past the house" (1). "There was a wind whining high..." (5).	Sense of oppression, foreboding, anger, conflict.
Simile	"...sun raced like a wizened orange" (1). "Distraught like a bird that has felt the grave of talons on its wing" (1).	Sense of old, dried up land and relationship. Sense of fear and pain and death.
Imagery	"Beaten and mounded smooth with dust as if a sea in gentle swell had turned to stone" (6).	Sense of permanence of the situation; like nothing will change for the better.
Foreshadowing	The lamp symbolizes an inability to see: "A little before noon she lit the lamp" (1). When the lamp is extinguished, it signals the loss of hope, and foreshadows the loss of Paul and Ellen's baby: "The door was open, the lamp blown out, the crib empty" (6). "See Paul – I stand like this all day. I just stand still – so caged! If I could only run!" (4) (5)	The lack of literal vision foreshadows Paul and Ellen's inability to see the truth (in the farm, and in running with the baby, respectively). See notes at left. Repetition of this phrase increases its impact, making it clear something bad will happen – that Ellen is likely to run.
Irony	Paul did not want to take charity but had to take loans to survive (3). Ellen tries to do what is best for the baby but he dies in the process: "The child was quite cold" (7).	Anger towards Paul for being selfish and ignorant to the truth. Sympathy for Ellen.

9. **Pathetic fallacy** is a literary device that uses the natural world as a mirror for the emotional state of the characters. Explain how Ross uses this device to create meaning in the short story.

Answers will vary and may include the following:

There are two winds: one in flight and one pursuing – just like Paul and Ellen.
The weather makes it impossible to see, just as Paul and Ellen cannot see what they need to see.
The wind cries just as the baby cries.
The fields are empty and void of growth, just as Paul and Ellen's marriage is no longer growing.

After Reading: Evidence of Theme

10. In a properly structured paragraph, describe how Ross **contrasts perception and reality** in the story. Refer to the characters and use specific examples from the text to explore this theme.