

- 1 Write a critical commentary on the following extract from the novel *The Unbelonging* by Joan Riley (published in 1985).

Hyacinth, a girl from Jamaica, has been sent to join her father, living in London.

The three of them were in their secret place again and the sound of their laughter rose through the sweet-scented bushes from where they lay. Hyacinth felt the lazy warmth of the early afternoon air wrap her in well-being as she lay back in the cool grass, listening idly to the conversation. It was safe in this little green cave, the recesses of the bushes laden with long-stemmed hibiscus and yellow trumpet-flowers and humming with insect activity. 5

They were talking about the Independence parade just past, and Hyacinth soon lost interest, her mind centred on the warm glow of contentment somewhere in the centre of her chest. She was slipping back, back to the fever of anticipation, the mounting impatience as the minutes on the face of the monument clock slipped slowly by. 10

Hyacinth was hopping from foot to foot, caught in the excitement, part of that jostling good-natured crowd, craning forward, impatient to see the first float appear. They had been lucky to get a place right at the front, and she pressed closer to Aunt Joyce's reassuring bulk as the crowd surged against her. She was glad of the cane-cutter's hat on her head, and of the little breeze that was so cool where it blew on the wet patches of sweat on her back and under her arms. Aunt Joyce had a big sombrero slung lazily across her bulk, eyes squinting against the glare of the sun, the usual smile on her face as she turned every few minutes to exchange words with her neighbour. 15 20

Suddenly there was silence in the crowd. Far away in the distance came the sound of a flute, followed by the boom of a big goatskin drum. Hyacinth's heart skipped a beat, then raced with excitement. She shuffled, as the crowd surged around her, craning forward, pushing out eagerly, wanting to catch her first glimpse of the colourful band float. Her aunt's big hand grabbed her dress, shook her. 25

'Hyacinth! Hyacinth!'

She shrugged impatiently, trying to shake free of the hand, caught in the excitement of the day. But it gripped on, refused to be dislodged.

'Hyacinth!'

The voice had become insistent, the hand moved to her shoulder, curled round, became biting, vicious, a painful pinch that seemed to pull her back. 30

'Hyacinth, wake up!'

The voice was no longer the mellow one of her good-natured aunt. Harsh and strident, the accent grated on her ears, as a final vicious shake yanked her away from her peace. Coldness enveloped her, clammy cold fingers dragged her back to consciousness. Her mind struggled in confusion, unable to grasp the change for a few, endless seconds. 35

'You wet the bed again!'

The words came out on a snap of teeth, a hiss of anger, bringing painful and instant awareness with them. Hyacinth struggled to sit up, eyes opening reluctantly to dingy grey walls, before moving blankly to the equally grey sky she could just glimpse through the ill-fitting curtains. 40

'Look at me, girl!'

Dull eyes slid sullenly across the mean room, locking apprehensively with protruding bloodshot spite as the yellow-skinned woman glared her hatred down at her. 45

Hyacinth forced herself to stay calm, not to beg. Her mind still wrestling with the shock of disappointment, she clenched herself against the cold that stung and bit, where the sodden nightdress clung to her in clammy folds. She would have clutched herself for warmth, but knew that the woman would see it as defiance. Instead she 50

hung her head, hands loose beside her on the sheet, becoming gradually aware of feeling slightly breathless, of a pulse drumming in her ears, and her eyes burning with self-pity and the desire to cry.

'Get up, girl,' the woman shouted, as Hyacinth continued to sit in silent misery. She stayed where she was, incapable of response, of obedience, for a few moments. 55 The woman shifted menacingly, and Hyacinth could sense the angry impatience within her. It mobilised her, caused her to push her legs to the floor in an automatic motion. Her whole body was mechanical, twisting jerkily, legs shifting, feet lowered to cold floorboards, dragging her sodden cotton nightdress as she stood. Thin, rank cloth clung to her and the angle of her body was tense and awkward with expectation. 60

'Wait till your father gets home!'

It was said with triumph, a final blow against an already defeated enemy.

2 Write a critical comparison of the two poems printed below.

After the Winter

Some day, when trees have shed their leaves
 And against the morning's white
 The shivering birds beneath the eaves
 Have sheltered for the night,
 We'll turn our faces southward, love, 5
 Toward the summer isle
 Where bamboos spire the shafted grove
 And wide-mouthed orchids smile.

And we will seek the quiet hill
 Where towers the cotton tree, 10
 And leaps the laughing crystal rill¹,
 And works the droning bee.
 And we will build a cottage there
 Beside an open glade,
 With black-ribbed blue-bells blowing near, 15
 And ferns that never fade.

¹*rill*: a channel of water

Claude McKay (published in 1919)

In time of silver rain

In time of silver rain
 The earth puts forth new life again,
 Green grasses grow
 And flowers lift their heads,
 And over all the plain 5
 The wonder spreads

Of Life,
 Of Life,
 Of life!

In time of silver rain 10
 The butterflies lift silken wings
 To catch a rainbow cry,
 And trees put forth new leaves to sing
 In joy beneath the sky
 As down the roadway 15
 Passing boys and girls
 Go singing, too,
 In time of silver rain
 When spring
 And life 20
 Are new.

Langston Hughes (published in 1947)

Turn over for Question 3.

3 Write a critical commentary on the following extract from the play *Fail/Safe* by Ayshe Raif (first produced in 1986).

The play is set in London. Jo, aged 42, is visiting her mother Gwen, aged 70.

	<i>The curtain rises on JO sitting at the table, drinking tea. GWEN enters with toast. She puts it on the table and surveys the breakfast.</i>	
Gwen:	It's just that you said nine.	
Jo	[<i>butters toast</i>]: You don't have to take everything I say as gospel ¹ you know.	5
Gwen	[<i>sits, pours herself some tea</i>]: I had the tea ready. I was worried.	
Jo:	That makes a change. You shouldn't have waited up Mum.	
Gwen:	Why couldn't you have come earlier? [<i>shakes out a napkin and puts it over JO's lap</i>]	
Jo:	I told you, I was working. [<i>shoos her off</i>] Stop it.	10
Gwen:	Till so late in the evening?	
Jo:	Some of it is evening work. Most of it is evening work. Look do we have to have an inquisition?	
Gwen:	I don't like you working nights; it's dangerous.	
Jo:	Not nights. Evenings.	15
Gwen:	There's some strange people about.	
Jo:	Especially in Wapping. [<i>does a mad tick and hunchback</i>].	
Gwen	[<i>ignoring this</i>]: You should look for another job. What about an office job?	
Jo	[<i>taps typewriting on table</i>]: Twelve letters before lunch – ting! – six reports before five – ting!	20
Gwen:	Perhaps you could find one round here? When you get here so late it gives us no time at all.	
Jo	[<i>salutes</i>]: Message received and understood.	
Gwen:	Perhaps you just don't wanna come home at the weekends.	25
Jo	[<i>eating</i>]: I don't.	
Gwen:	You know I live for my weekends. Since your father died I –	
Jo:	I know.	
Gwen:	I know, I should've had more children –	
Jo:	I know, I know! Don't go on Mum, the same things over and over! [<i>Coughs and splutters. GWEN jumps up and pats her on the back. The coughing passes and JO pushes her away. Sips tea, recovers.</i>] Alright. [<i>sighs</i>] I can't bear to be away from you Mummy; I can't wait to rush here every weekend to watch the telly Mummy.	30
Gwen:	Oh didn't I say? It's not working.	35
Jo:	Oh no! [<i>she goes to see for herself</i>] Why didn't you get it fixed?	
Gwen:	It's too expensive.	
Jo:	Don't be stubborn. You won't last out.	
Gwen:	I suppose not. It's the only company I have in the week.	
Jo:	You probably talked it to death.	40
Gwen:	I don't!	

- Jo: You've been doing it for years.
- Gwen [*firmly*]: I do not talk to the television.
- Jo: Yes Mum [*she returns to the table to finish breakfast*] I'm glad I brought my records. 45
- Gwen: Can't you do without them for a day?
- Jo: Mm-mm. [*meaning no*]
- Gwen [*tuts, pause*]: Shall we go to see your Aunt Ella tomorrow?
- Jo: The weekly pilgrimage from Hackney to Walthamstow is the highlight of my week. 50
- Gwen: We don't go that often.
- Jo: Every Sunday for fifteen years.
- Gwen: She hardly ever comes here.
- Jo: Wonder why?
- Gwen: She should. I'm eldest. 55
- Jo: Yes Mum.
 [*Pause. The bus passes. This is a regular occurrence. It rumbles by slowly and shoots a neon glare at the window. The bar of neon light can be seen even when the curtains are drawn. It can be a maddening or comforting familiarity, depending on your mood.*] 60
- Gwen: Did I tell you the neighbours are having new windows put in? I heard it'll cost £2,000.
- Jo: Ooo!
- Gwen: I don't know where they've found the money because he's only a milkman and she doesn't work. He goes to work ever so early. I hear him leave. [*Pause*] I don't sleep so well these days. 65
- Jo [*clearing table*]: You should tell the doctor.
- Gwen: I can't get used to being alone Josie.
- Jo: You should take a lover.
- Gwen: Behave. 70
- Jo: Why not? [*takes tray to kitchen*]
- Gwen: I've already got two in the upstairs cupboard.
- Jo [*returning*]: Only two?
- Gwen: You don't want too many strange men in your home do you?
- Jo: Your home Mum. Have as many men as you like. 75
- Gwen: And your home. Even if you're not here in the week, your room's still your room, any time you want to come back.
- Jo [*sighs*]: We had this conversation last week. [*Goes to sofa and lies on it. GWEN deliberately comes and sits in the armchair facing JO who, sensing a plea, turns over and puts the cushion over her head.*] 80

¹ *as gospel* – as if it was true

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