

# AQA GCSE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 1: Explorations in creative reading and writing

**SET P**

---

## Insert

The source that follows is:

Source A: 20th Century prose-fiction

*The New Dress* by Virginia Woolf

An extract from a short story published in 1927

## Source A

This extract is from the beginning of a short story by Virginia Woolf. The story follows Mabel Waring, a middle-aged woman who attends a high-society party hosted by Clarissa Dalloway. Mabel has had a new yellow silk dress made by a dressmaker cheaply to save money.

Mabel had her first serious suspicion that something was wrong as she took her cloak off. Mrs Barnet, the attendant, handed her a mirror and touched the brushes on the dressing table, drawing attention to all the appliances for improving hair and complexion. This confirmed the suspicion — that it was not right, not quite right. The feeling grew stronger as she went upstairs. It sprang at her with conviction as she greeted her hostess, Clarissa Dalloway. Mabel went straight to the far end of the room, to a shaded corner where a looking-glass\* hung, and looked. No! It was not right.

At once the misery which she always tried to hide set upon her. It was a profound dissatisfaction — the sense she had had, ever since she was a child, of being inferior to other people. It hit her relentlessly, remorselessly, with an intensity which she could not beat off. For oh these men, oh these women, all were thinking: "What's Mabel wearing? What a fright she looks! What a hideous new dress!"

She dared not look in the glass. She could not face the whole horror — the pale yellow, idiotically old-fashioned silk dress with its long skirt and its high sleeves and its waist and all the things that looked so charming in the fashion book, but not on her, not among all these ordinary people. She felt like a dressmaker's dummy\* standing there, for young people to stick pins into.

"But, my dear, it's perfectly charming!" Rose Shaw said, looking her up and down with that little satirical\* pucker of the lips which she expected — Rose herself being dressed in the height of the fashion, precisely like everybody else, always.

We are all like flies trying to crawl over the edge of the saucer, Mabel thought. She repeated the phrase as if she were trying to find some spell to remove this pain, to make this agony endurable. "Flies trying to crawl," she repeated. If she could say that over often enough and make herself see the flies, she would become numb, chill, frozen, dumb. Now she could see flies crawling slowly out of a saucer of milk with their wings stuck together; and she strained and strained (standing in front of the looking-glass\*, listening to Rose Shaw) to make herself see Rose Shaw and all the other people there as flies, trying to hoist themselves out of something, or into something, meagre, insignificant, toiling flies. But she could not see them like that, not other people. She saw herself like that — she was a fly, but the others were dragonflies, butterflies, beautiful insects, dancing, fluttering, skimming, while she alone dragged herself up out of the saucer.

"I feel like some dowdy\*, decrepit, horribly dingy old fly," she said, making Robert Haydon stop just to hear her say that, just to reassure herself by showing how detached she was, how witty, that she did not feel in the least out of anything. And, of course, Robert Haydon answered something quite polite, quite insincere, which she saw through instantly.

40 For a party makes things either much more real, or much less real, she thought; she saw in a flash to the bottom of Robert Haydon's heart; she saw through everything. She saw the truth. *This* was true, this party, this self, and the other, previous version of herself, false. Her dressmaker's little workroom had been really terribly hot, stuffy, sordid\*. It smelt of clothes and cabbage cooking; and yet, when the seamstress had put the mirror in her hand, and she looked at herself with the yellow dress on, finished, an extraordinary bliss shot through her heart. Suffused with light, she sprang into existence. Rid of cares and wrinkles, what she had dreamed of herself was there: a beautiful woman, just for a second.

45 And now the whole thing had vanished. The dress, the room, the love, the pity, the scrolloping\* looking-glass — all had vanished, and here she was in a corner of Mrs Dalloway's drawing-room, suffering tortures, woken wide awake to reality.

50 She faced herself straight in the glass; she pecked at her left shoulder; she issued out into the room, as if spears were thrown at her yellow dress from all sides. But instead of looking fierce or tragic, as Rose Shaw would have done — Rose would have looked like a warrior queen — she looked foolish and self-conscious, and simpered\* like a schoolgirl and slouched across the room, positively slinking, as if she were a beaten mongrel\*. "Now the fly's in the saucer," she said to herself, "right in the middle, and can't get out, and the milk," she thought, rigidly staring at the picture, "is sticking its wings together."

*\*looking-glass - a mirror*

*\*dressmaker's dummy - a 3D model of the human torso used by dressmakers to fit clothing*

*\*satirical - critical or mocking of another's weaknesses*

*\*dowdy - unfashionable and unstylish*

*\*sordid - dirty or squalid*

*\*scrolloping - ornate or elaborate*

*\*simpered - to smile in a silly or self-conscious way*

*\*mongrel - a dog of no definable type or breed*

**End of source**