

**Lesson
One**

Heaven Eyes, Part 1

Aims

By the end of this lesson you should know more about:

- David Almond's writing style
- the main characters in the novel
- what Whitegates is like

Context

This lesson leads you into reading David Almond's novel *Heaven Eyes* and focuses on Part 1. The next three lessons focus on later sections of the novel, while the final lesson in the section looks at the novel as a whole.



Oxford Open Learning

Orphans and abandoned children


Heaven Eyes is about three part-orphaned, part-abandoned children who live in a home run by a woman who calls them 'damaged' children and seems to have very mixed feelings about their chances of growing up to lead more or less happy lives.

At one time it was more common in Britain for babies, and even older children, to be abandoned by their parents. In Victorian Britain, a young unmarried mother would be regarded as a sinner and shunned by 'respectable' society. They might also find it hard to provide for themselves and their baby. For these reasons, some young mothers gave birth in secret and abandoned their baby, perhaps on the doorstep of someone they thought would care for it.

In Britain, orphanages are now a thing of the past: children are adopted or fostered. However, in *Heaven Eyes*, David Almond stretches reality a little and has three of his main characters living in a home for damaged children.

Heaven Eyes is not the first book about such children. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is about an orphan, Jane, who is sent to Lowood, an orphanage. In the extract below, its manager, Mr Brocklehurst explains to the school superintendent why she should not have given the girls bread and cheese to make up for their breakfast porridge being too burnt to eat.

You are aware that my plan in bringing up these girls is, not to accustom them to habits of luxury and indulgence, but to render them hardy, patient, self-denying. Should any little accidental disappointment of the appetite occur, such as the spoiling of a meal, the under or the over dressing of a dish, the incident ought not to be neutralised by replacing with something more delicate the comfort lost, thus pampering the body and obviating the aim of this institution; it ought to be improved to the spiritual edification of the pupils, by encouraging them to evince fortitude under temporary privation. A brief address on those occasions would not be mistimed, wherein a judicious instructor would take the opportunity of referring to the sufferings of the primitive Christians; to the torments of martyrs; to the exhortations of our blessed Lord Himself, calling upon His disciples to take up their cross and follow Him; to His warnings that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God; to His divine consolations, "If ye suffer hunger or thirst for My sake, happy are ye." Oh, madam, when you put bread and cheese, instead of burnt porridge, into these children's mouths, you may indeed feed their vile bodies, but you little think how you starve their immortal souls!"

Activity One	1. What do you think it would be like to be brought up in an institution such as Lowood?
	2. What would you say to Mr Brocklehurst, if you could, about his views on bringing up orphaned children?

Part 1: Whitegates

The book is in three parts. This first part is set in the children's home and takes us up to the point when Erin Law (the narrator), January Carr and Mouse Gullane escape on a home-made raft.

Chapters 1–3

Chapter 1 introduces the main characters from the home – Erin, January, Mouse and Maureen. It also gives us some idea of what sort of story to expect:


Some people will tell you that none of these things happened. They'll say they were just a dream that the three of us shared. But they did happen. We did meet Heaven Eyes on the Black Middens. We did dig the saint out of the mud.

What impression does this make on you? How does this compare with the opening to *Stone Cold*? They are very different books!

Almond is dealing with different levels of reality – with a world in which things are more than their surface appearance, where they may also be **symbols** – standing for something else.

The characters are more concrete. Note, however, Maureen's ambivalence (conflicting feelings) about the children. How does she react when Erin is uncooperative? What do you think of the sessions in which she asks the children to tell their life stories?

Notice, too, that some things are not made explicit (remember that word?). For example, think about Mouse's tattoo. He thinks it shows his father's concern about him. What do you think?

Activity Two	1. How does Erin react to January's plan (Chapter 2)?
	2. Erin rejects Maureen's visualisation of floating in warm dark water, seeing herself instead on the raft, on cold, fast-flowing water (page 13). How do the two ideas symbolise what Maureen wants for the children, and what Erin wants for herself?

Activity Three	Make notes on your first impressions of these characters. What do we know about their backgrounds? How do they respond to other people? Are they angry, sad, bitter, hopeful ...?
Erin	
January	
Mouse	
Maureen	

Chapters 4-6

In Chapter 4, Erin packs for running away, then conducts a private ritual to summon her mother. She takes out from her 'cardboard treasure box' the things that remind her of her mother. She touches her mother's nail varnish to her nail and applies a little of the lipstick and perfume. The names are exotic: Sunset, Black Tulip, Dark Velvet. What do they make you think of?

Erin's memories are part of the ritual, but they also reveal her background to us, and why she is so resistant to Maureen's attempts to mother her. Whether you take her mother's arrival literally, as the entry of her spirit, or as something that happens in Erin's mind, its portrayal is tender and moving.

In Chapter 5, Erin's parting with Wilson Cairns is also moving, mysterious and open to interpretation. He believes that he can breathe on his clay figures and give them life. Could this be possible? Is he mad? Or is this more symbolism?

Fat Kev and Skinny Stu are strange figures. They seem largely indifferent to the children, though Fat Kev can be aggressive. Skinny Stu clearly does not believe that Erin and January will be 'back for supper' (he shows this by pretending to see a flying pig in the sky), yet he does nothing about it.

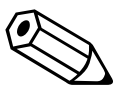
In Chapter 6, just as we think Erin and January are about to embark on their great adventure without further complication, they bump into Mouse. Erin is kinder to him than January is, but even she rejects his plea for them to take him with them.

It is an exciting moment when January uncovers the hidden raft. Even so, if 'she' is 'beautiful', perhaps this is more because of what the raft represents than because of its physical form.

January 'pinched' the doors from a warehouse (page 11). The lettering on them shows that they have come from buildings used by the public, not private homes. Is that all it shows?

Activity Four

Remember, there is a lot of symbolism in this novel. At one level, the words in the doors are just functional – 'Exit', for example, showed the way out. On a symbolic level they could mean much more.



1. On a piece of plain paper, write ENTRANCE, DANGER and EXIT widely spaced across it. You could use appropriate lettering (e.g. red for danger). Then write down and/or draw all the ideas that each word suggests to you. For example, ENTRANCE could suggest birth. Use your imagination.
2. January's curse (can you spell it correctly?) makes the 'darkening' river sound like the River Styx in Greek myth. It separates the land of the living from Hades, the land of the dead. Souls have to pay the ferryman to ferry them over. How does this add symbolically to the mood at this point?

Activity Five

Style focus

Reread from 'We turned away ...' to '... distant sea' (pages 32–3). The passage has a dreamlike quality. Almond builds up an impression of a sort of no-man's-land. He uses short sentences, presenting each detail in turn, like disconnected images floating past, without judging them.



1. Find examples of short sentences giving unconnected details.
2. Deliberate repetition is also part of the hypnotic style. Find an example.
3. What atmosphere is created by the description, and how might it be appropriate to the coming adventure?
4. What image is used at the end and what is its effect?
5. How does the style compare with *Jane Eyre*?

Chapters 7–9

We have seen how Almond sometimes uses short sentences very effectively. Chapter 7 begins with another descriptive paragraph made up of quite short sentences.

Activity Six

Sentences

Grammatically, there is nothing wrong with short sentences. On the other hand, it is wrong to use a comma between sentences when there should be a full stop and capital letter.

Example: The sun fell, my heart thundered.

This would be wrong. However, Almond could have written:

The sun fell and my heart thundered.

Or: As the sun fell, my heart was thundering.

Rewrite the opening paragraph combining short sentences where possible. You can rearrange words as in the example above, but don't change more than is necessary. The paragraph consists of ten sentences. You should be able to make this four or five.



Mouse persuades

At the start of the chapter it seems that Erin and January will share the adventure together. They seem close:

We crouched close together. He stared into my eyes.

And: 'And we've got each other. We'll be in this together.'

But Mouse's appearance puts an end to that. What is persuasive about him? Would you take him with you if you were Erin or January? Notice that he pays January his 'fare', making January

like Charon, the ferryman on the River Styx. There is also the repeated oath 'Hell's teeth!', as if they are entering the jaws of hell!

The launch

Mouse begins to prove his worth in Chapter 8, as he urges Erin on. He is also the first to jump onto the raft. It is a dramatic moment as they set off, gasping and yelling 'with terror and excitement'. The imagery adds to the effect: 'The sky was vivid red. The river was like running molten metal.' January's face burns 'like the sky'.

The voyage

Chapter 9 is devoted to the voyage downstream. This is beset with uncertainty. The paddles turn out to be 'skinny things, almost useless'. The current takes them in one direction, then another. They are soon soaked and cold. There is something magical about their journey, but at the same time they are on a very real river, flowing through a very real city, and then through its outskirts and beyond. There is even a link with the outside world in the shape of the girls, out for the evening, who yell out 'Bobby Shaftoe' (from the song about the boy who goes to sea).

Notice that this whole chapter is one long, flowing paragraph, like the river journey itself.


Activity Seven

Much of the writing in *Heaven Eyes* is poetic. Reread the passage in which Erin summons her mother (Chapter 4) and the passage describing the river journey (Chapter 9). Then write a poem based on one of them.

If you choose the first, you could use the names Sunset, Black Tulip, Dark Velvet.


If you choose the second, you could focus on details such as:

- 'The moon ... a white ball'
- 'Stars glittered, first a handful then a skyful'
- 'dilapidated quays'
- 'Huge gaps of blackness'
- the mist
- booming voices
- rocking, lurching, spinning
- 'water gently slopping'

	
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**Self-
assessment
test****Answer, then check your answers**

1. How does Wilson Cairns spend his time? (p. 25)
2. What are the names of Maureen's assistants? (p. 6)
3. What picture does Mouse carry with him? (p. 8)
4. How does January dress for running away? (p. 25)
5. What is Erin's last memory of her mother? (p. 22)
6. How much does Mouse pay January? (p. 38)

	
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