



Teacher introduction

In 1965 British TV viewers were given a representation of the struggle facing a young working class mother trying to bring up her children despite poverty and appalling housing conditions. She was Cathy and the film was Ken Loach's *Cathy Come Home*. So shocking was the film that it stirred up national outrage and gave an enormous boost to the recently formed housing charity Shelter.

Forty years on, another film concerning social and economic deprivation affecting a young woman and her child has been made. This time it concerns a pugnacious teenager called Leigh-Anne Williams and her sickly daughter Rebecca, living in a damp and frequently 'electricity-less' house in 'Lakedown'—actually Portend in Swansea - on a road bounded claustrophobically by a sheer mountain face at one end and the sea at the other. The film is *A Way of Life* by first-time director and once child actor Amma Asante.

Actress Stephanie James' depiction of Leigh-Anne's response to poverty in many ways could not be more far removed from the stance Cathy takes faced by a sea of troubles, and yet Asante grants her heroine room enough for dignity. There are other echoes of *Cathy Come Home* too, particularly in the incidental shots of neglected places and neglected children - a reminder of the scale of the need in this seemingly forgotten part of Britain.

Asante describes *A Way of Life* as a tragedy. It is worth studying in the light of that comment – although whose tragedy is central is hard to say. The film is a model of economic story telling, and these notes also examine the abbreviated way in which Asante introduces characters and suggests the relationships between them. The film is a richly symbolic work, in which the surroundings - often rendered beautiful in sunset and sunrise light - and little Rebecca's presence both have the power to generate different significance depending on their immediate context.

A Way of Life is uncompromising in its depiction of lives led at the very margins of society. Politicians in England and Wales speak of social exclusion and the desire to end child poverty in a single generation and here both are imagined and represented in all their bleakness. It depicts the enduring poverty of opportunity and hope that can blight one generation after another in the poorest parts of our otherwise extraordinarily rich country. In doing so, it suggests how much has still to be done for such young people whose lives have ended up so disjointed and ferocious.

suitable for

GCSE Eng EN1 Speaking and listening, EN2 Studying media texts, EN3 Writing, Citizenship: Human Rights, Living in a diverse community, Current news issues and PSHE.



Representing Britain

Amma Asante made a conscious decision to film her story in South Wales. Despite having grown up on the receiving end of racial abuse as a child in South East London, she was determined not to set it in a more cosmopolitan setting such as the Capital, where there might be similar poverty but where the racial mix in the community would perhaps blur the significance she wished to attach to Leigh-Anne and her boys' knee-jerk racism.



What comes to mind when you think of modern Britain? Write down a list of ten things that, for you, encapsulate the British Isles. When you have a list, compare them with your classmates' choices. Your task is then to explain why it is you have made these choices. Why are these places, objects, and people emblematic of this country? How do the things you have chosen reflect your experiences, your family background or the kinds of filtered version of the country you get via the TV or radio?

If you can, repeat the exercise for Wales. Put 'Wales' into a search engine and you will receive links to numerous sites offering you the 'best' of that country online. These provide one perspective. An alternative vision might be derived from local newspapers, social services and health statistics. A search of national stories on the online websites of newspapers such as the Guardian concerning Wales might also reveal the kinds of issues that are not mentioned in the tourist bureaux publications. Construct a two-sided poster of Wales including the traditional cultural elements and the other side; the lives actually lived by many people in the country.

When you have seen A Way of Life consider the impression it provides of life in the UK. Are there elements in the film that occur on your list and some that are absent?



How does Asante use the following settings either to suggest things about her characters' state of mind or attitudes or their circumstances?

- Lynne's Kitchen Café in which we first meet Leigh-Anne attempting to cut the fat off rubbery chicken before feeding it to baby Rebecca.
- The simple playground with swings to which Leigh-Anne retreats to think about her life usually after disappointments such as being refused an emergency payment to cover her electricity costs.
- The pub – when Leigh-Anne makes the deal with the older man regarding Helen.
- The canal/river side waste ground where Helen is sold to the creepy man.
- Gelli Street where Leigh-Anne lives.
- The Department of Work office where Leigh-Anne goes searching for extra benefits.
- The buses that Leigh-Anne takes to go into town to see Annette Lewis, her child's grandmother.
- The fish and chip shop where Leigh-Anne and the boys cause trouble – emptying rubbish onto the floor and having chip fights.
- The school gate where Gavin meets Julie Osman.
- The police car that arrives at Leigh-Anne's house or the 'bobbies' that interview her on her doorstep.



What is poverty?

This may seem like a perfectly obvious question but in fact it is something that is hard to measure precisely. The Government uses a number of measures including a threshold that states people who get by on money that is just 60% of the median income in society are on a low income. (The median – or person in the middle – is chosen because averages can be distorted by a few people on vast incomes at the top end of the scale.) Recently, after housing costs were taken out a lone parent with two children was on the low-income threshold if they had less than £207 coming in per week.

Another way of measuring poverty involves assessing a person or family's 'material deprivation indicators'. These might include someone's quality of housing, his or her ability to go on holiday for a week a year or take a child to a swimming pool once a month.

- What level of income do you think marks the point below which people can be considered to be poor?
- What things might a person have difficulty affording and which (by their absence) could be used to indicate whether they are poor or not?
- What physical characteristics might be used as indicators of poverty?
- What emotional/spiritual/educational or moral indicators (if any) could be used to measure a person's degree of social exclusion? Could such things ever be measured? For example, is being a considerate neighbour a sign that someone is not socially excluded? Is someone's owning books and reading them with a child a sign of their not being socially excluded? Is refusing to have nothing to do with others' criminal activities a sign that a person is less 'impoverished' than those that do?



P o v e r t y i n A W a y o f L i f e

As you watch the film, try to keep a tally of the kinds of things that suggest Leigh-Anne's desperate financial and social circumstances. Make a table using such things as money, health, sexual activity, criminal activity, heat, water, light, household equipment, baby equipment etc. You could also broaden this exercise to include all the other characters in the film, particularly the boys – Robbie, Gavin and Stephen.



How many indicators in your table does the film contain of her social exclusion? What sorts of things do we not see her doing either for herself or with baby Rebecca that might suggest her low income, poor parenting knowledge or limited access to services?

Do you feel Leigh-Anne regards herself as poor? What evidence is there in the film that she feels she is missing out or is made angry or desperate by the situation she finds herself in? What do you feel she is thinking (if anything) in one or more of the scenes in which we see her staring blankly into space – particularly when she sits quietly in the children's playground.

Do you feel Leigh-Anne is trapped by her poverty or could she do more to help herself?

Several times people accuse her directly or by implication of being selfish. Do you think she is? Do you blame her?



Social exclusion perpetuates itself

One of the key concerns of government is how poverty has a habit of perpetuating itself from one generation to the next. This possibility is clearly raised in *A Way of Life*. Using the film as your evidence, what suggestions are there that Leigh-Anne, her brother and the other boys Robbie and Stephen are the product of chaotic upbringings?

Do you feel the film is sympathetic to Leigh-Anne and the boys because it tried to provide something of her previous history?



To what extent do you feel the boys are trapped by their circumstances? Consider the following elements of their story and how they function as possible means of escape for them. How does the film present these different 'opportunities'? Do you think it wishes us to feel they could be liberating or are they all ultimately futile?

Robbie's desire to get away from South Wales

There is an important scene in which he attempts to discuss his plans with his mates. What do you feel this scene reveals about his ambitions and the chances that they will be realised?

Later he attends an interview at an old people's home. How does this scene reflect the difficulties that he has breaking out of his personal trap in Lakedown? Do you feel the nursing home administrator is correct not to employ him? Do you feel the film is sympathetic to her when she makes the decision she does? What is the effect of the sudden cut that jumps us from the interior scene to the exterior with Robbie marching off down the road? Why does the camera linger on Robbie as he makes his way into the distance?



Gavin's love for Julie Osman

Given the attitude that Leigh-Anne and the others have to Julie's father, it is not surprising that this relationship does not offer up much in the way of hope or escape for Gavin. But there is a sense that this is the one good thing in his life at times – born of positive emotions that actually transcend, albeit only temporarily, the barriers that others in his group are erecting between themselves and the Osmans. Despite this what hints are there that the relationship will not be robust enough to offset all the negativity that surrounds Gavin?

Consider, for example, the early confrontation between Leigh-Anne and Julie regarding Leigh-Anne's use of Helen? Then there is the setting in which Gavin and Julie finally come together – do you feel that it provides a hopeful backdrop to their relationship? Again, their embrace in the street, Julie perched on a dumped washing machine is potentially symbolic too. Finally, what of the 'condom' conversation the two of them have when beginning their lovemaking – is that a sign of a maturity and respect that is likely to carry them both beyond their present circumstances?

Stephen's desire to free himself of his surname – Rajah

He alters his surname by deed poll to Hughes so that he can pretend he is son of Mark Hughes – the Welsh national football team coach at the time when the film was being made. What potential do you feel this endeavour has to help Stephen out of his present predicament?

What do you think the care home manager feels about Stephen's desire? Immediately before we see Stephen receive his first news of his application, we witness him in a vicious fight with a fellow hostel member over a mobile telephone. How does this add to or subtract from the hopes Stephen attaches to his name change?

What is significant about the fact that it is Stephen that wrecks Gavin's singing of the Welsh hymn when they are all gathered at Leigh-Anne's house after their successful delivery of the fridge? The words of the hymn were written incidentally by a John Hughes: 'Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, /Pilgrim through this barren land. /I am weak, but thou art mighty; /Hold me with thy powerful hand. /Bread of heaven, bread of heaven, /Feed me till I want no more; /Feed me till I want no more.' Gavin changes the words of the chorus to 'Shag me till I want no more'.

To get closer to this moment in the film, try to find and download the full lyrics of this hymn off the internet. On several occasions Gavin is shown looking at the stars. Similarly, the camera often dwells on Leigh-Anne as she stares into space after one or other crisis in her life. In some respects the hymn is a hint of past consolations for poor people in Wales who had their faith and a strong sense of identity that came from community and church. Do you get any sense that that self-respect and mutual support and shared outlook of previous generations have survived through to the present to offer solace to Leigh-Anne and her boys?

Finally, what of Stephen's part in the attack on Hassan Osman? To what extent is this a fundamental attack on himself?



Leigh-Anne as mother hen

This is how the actor Nathan Jones (Gavin Williams, Leigh-Anne's brother) describes her, but is this an accurate portrait of her role in the film? She may sleep in a bed with a large furry, red heart on the wall next to it, but is she all heart? Write down as many examples of where she appears to nurture her brother and friends or offer them truly selfless help or support. Catalogue the times when she directly or more subtly resents or seeks to undermine their goals. For example, there are scenes in which she opens her house to her brother and the other boys, but there are also times when she directly belittles their goals or demands their loyalty to her own twisted vision of the world.



P o v e r t y a n d v i o l e n c e

Do you feel that the violence in the film is justified? Yes – it fulfils important narrative functions, creating the final tragedy, but is it unfair of the filmmaker to suggest that for those living pretty near the bottom of society's heap, violence is an inevitable part of their lives and a key means they have of asserting themselves in the world? Do you feel the film suggests this?

What do you find the most shocking aspects of the violence you see in the film?

- The fact that the attack on Hassan Osman takes place on a leafy suburban road, not in some dingy alley?
- The fact that the circumstances that generate the attack are so fuelled by chance.
- The fact that the boys as they run after Osman, ritually and pre-meditatively pull their hoods over their heads, almost in one synchronised action. The implication is that this is a well-developed instinct in them, one that they know how to execute while covering themselves from easy identification.
- The fact that a little boy and Rebecca, from whose perspective several of the shots during the scene are filmed, witness the attack?
- The fact that in the fight Julie gets kicked in the face.
- The fact that it is Leigh-Anne that delivers 'the coup de grace' – kicking Osman when he is entirely defenceless. Do you feel it is worse that it is Leigh-Anne, a girl, who is a part of the violence? There have been a number of well-publicised cases recently in which gangs including girls have attacked people. Would the press have been as interested in such stories had girls not been involved?
- The fact that the boys (Gavin excepted) are next seen tucking into a shared bowl of chips. Robbie's clothes are clearly still covered in Osman's blood.



P o v e r t y a n d s e x

The sex in *A Way of Life* is portrayed in several ways. We have at least three explicit moments in which characters have sex, but the occasions are treated in very different ways. Here are these moments plus some other occasions that may have sexual overtones – your task is to discuss the way they are portrayed and/or the function (job) they perform in the film as a whole? For example, these moments may develop our understanding of the characters involved and of the person from whose point of view we are witnessing these scenes?

- We see the consequence of Leigh-Anne's involvement with Dylan Lewis (mentioned in the script only) in the shape of Rebecca, but what sense of any joy 'in her making' is there, if any?
- We see the sex between the man and Helen behind the pub. Leigh-Anne noticeably turns away from this scene and we are put in a voyeuristic position staring at it occurring behind her. How does the setting and the manner of the performance of this scene suggest its ugliness?
- We see the sex between Leigh-Anne and Stephen, witnessed through a crack in the door by Robbie. How is Leigh-Anne's behaviour represented and why does she do it? What is the 'meaning' of the sex, given that it is through Robbie's eyes that we witness it?
- How is the sex between Julie and Gavin presented? In what way does it differ from the previous incidents? Why were they so public and this occasion was by contrast dealt with so discreetly?
- What do we gather from the exchanges between Leigh-Anne and her stepfather when she goes around to visit her sister? He holds her against the door near the end of the scene when searching her for something she has taken and the moment is significant on a number of levels, perhaps?

M i s e e n s c e n e

Discuss the impact of the settings on the impact of the sex scenes we witness in the film. In what way does the environment associated with Julie and Gavin's scene contain both negative and positive messages about their relationship and its prospects? What do you make of the set elements that are prominent in this scene and make up its 'mise en scene' such as the cowboy model, the dartboard, or the candles? Julie's clothes are also significant – her top carries the motif of a spangley butterfly? Of course, this might have been a chance thing, but there is something quite symbolic about her character, the motif of stars in the film and her t-shirt at this key moment? That butterflies are also very delicate is suggestive too, perhaps?



P o v e r t y a n d a f f e c t i o n

There are not many moments in the film in which characters share moments of intimacy or affection. When they do occur they are all the more remarkable. As you watch the film write down any examples of touches, affectionate kisses and acts of gentleness or playfulness in the left-hand column. Use the other column to record moments of aggression (word and deed) over and above the most obvious acts of violence discussed in a previous exercise.

A f f e c t i o n	A g g r e s s i o n

What, looking back at the tally you have accumulated in the table do you feel is the dominant form of exchange between people in the world of the film?

Can you spot in this list any additional reason why Leigh-Anne feels so antagonistic towards Julie and her father? When she witnesses them having a sponge fight while washing Osman's van, her attitude to them hardens and she indulges in the first outright act of violence against them – scratching the side of the van with her keys. Why does she do this? Is her ensuing racism a mask for something else she hates about them and lacks in herself?



P o v e r t y a n d b e a u t y

Are poor people capable of creating beautiful things or of appreciating beauty? Do you feel the film contains moments when either of these takes place? Make a list and then analyse what these moments, such as the time when the boys look at the stars from outside Leigh-Anne's home, actually signify for the characters involved. Under arrest, Gavin will again look at the stars, what does this moment signify?

Throughout the film, scenes cut to long shots of the docks and the estuary at the bottom of Leigh-Anne's road and around her hometown. Often they are filmed in silhouette against brilliant sunsets. But what do you make of these moments? Keep a checklist of them, indicating what has happened immediately before and occurs immediately after. Then look back to see whether or not the significance of these views alters dependant on when they occur in the story. At times perhaps they are straightforwardly beautiful, at other times they are suggestive of something beautiful the characters consistently fail to see and at other times they are a hint of how trapped the characters are?

P o v e r t y a n d j o y

There is not much out and out joy in the film, but there are two significant moments of innocent joyous release for characters and both of them are occasioned by music. The first sees Leigh-Anne bouncing on her bed. The second comes after Leigh-Anne runs off with Rebecca from the hospital and is picked up by the boys in a car. Study these two scenes and discuss what impression you get of the characters at this point and whether or not these moments are unequivocally joyous or contain within them still some of the characters' desperation?

T e l l i n g t a l e s

In her notes to the film, director Amma Asante suggests that it is a tragedy. This is a term that is often overused, but it may be a useful way of understanding the way in which the story is arranged in the film.

Match the following statements to events in the film, if possible. Do they all apply?

- In all tragedies there is a leading character that enjoys authority and respect.
- This character often contains a fatal flaw in their character that allows them to set in motion the ensuing tragic events.
- In an effort to avoid the thing they most fear, the tragic figure often manages to make that thing happen.
- In tragedies, the leading tragic figure is often governed by fate or chance.
- In tragedies, the leading tragic figure often realises his/her error in a moment of shock and horror.
- In tragedies, the final desperate end, is meant to be cathartic – allowing the audience a sense of emotional release?



The functions of Rebecca

At one level, of course, little Rebecca is just a little baby in the film. But *A Way of Life* is also a piece of artistic fiction in which even the most innocent seeming events can take on added significance. One of the most important sources of meaning in the film is Rebecca.

Your task is to note down as many of the moments in which Rebecca appears. Then consider how her innocent presence adds an extra dimension to the scene that is going on around her?

Rebecca's appearances

Rebecca in café reaching for sausage across the table.

Rebecca being pushed in a pram back home along a bleak road bounded by dry grass and beyond that a leaden stretch of water with cranes and other industrial buildings and machinery beyond.

significance

This is Rebecca's first appearance. Her environment is hardly ideal. The table is dirty and the food inappropriate. Leigh-Anne makes an effort to parent her, ensuring she cannot reach the greasy sausage and attempting to strip the worst of the fat of the bacon before feeding her with what remains. She then lights a cigarette next to Rebecca. She then glances out of the window and sees a very young boy being reprimanded by a policeman – her future will involve the police, but is this also a hint of the kind of life Rebecca can expect as she grows up?

What do you feel Rebecca's chances are in this kind of environment? Is it important to have access to beauty as you are growing up?



Rebecca's appearances	significance



Final activities

1. Write a review of the film. Do you feel it misrepresents young people or poor people? Should it have been less bleak in its depiction of their lives? Does it offer any hope?
2. The film contains both fairly explicit sex and violence and a teacher wishing to show the film to a class in its entirety might face objections from parents (and even some young people). Do you feel such objections would be justified and, if so, why? Alternatively, draft a letter in which you, as head of media studies or personal, social and health education (PSHE) in your school explaining why there are valuable lessons young people can learn from the film and why, perhaps showing the violent or sexual content is important.
3. Use the film as a launch pad for an investigation of poverty and social exclusion in Britain.
4. On the evidence of A Way of Life – do you feel (to misuse the Biblical quote, somewhat) 'the poor will always be with us'?