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On the Face of It Class 12 English NCERT Solutions: text-grounded answers for Susan Hill's play on disfigurement, loneliness and friendship (2026-27)

Chapter 5: On the Face of It

About this Chapter

On the Face of It is a one-act radio play by Susan Hill from the Vistas supplementary reader. Derry, a fourteen-year-old boy whose face has been disfigured by acid, climbs into the garden of **Mr Lamb**, an old man with a tin leg who describes himself as Lamey-Lamb. The play follows three short scenes in which the two outsiders meet, argue and almost reach a friendship, before Mr Lamb's accident with the crab-apple ladder ends the play on a quiet, ambiguous note. These solutions answer every Reading with Insight question with specific lines and stage directions from the play.

Topics covered: Pain of physical disability • Loneliness and alienation • Self-image and the gaze of others • Friendship across age and difference • The natural world as comfort

Author and source.
Susan Hill (b. 1942), British novelist and playwright; from her 1970s radio plays for the BBC, reprinted in NCERT Vistas, Class 12.

Setting.
Mr Lamb's garden and Derry's house. Three short scenes; mostly outdoors among the crab-apple trees, weeds and sunflowers.

Central conflict.
Derry has been disfigured by acid and has withdrawn from the world. Mr Lamb, lonely behind his garden wall, tries to coax him back into ordinary life. The play asks whether a brief conversation in a garden can change a boy's idea of himself.

Also see for this chapter: Revision Notes

Reading with Insight

Q 5.1 **What is it that draws Derry towards Mr Lamb inspite of himself?**

SOLUTION

Several small things, taken together, draw Derry back to Mr Lamb's garden against his own habit of running away from people. The play is careful to show that the pull is not one sentimental moment; it is a steady accumulation of differences between Mr Lamb and everyone else Derry has met.

☞ **Lines from the play**

"It's got nothing to do with my face and what I look like. I don't care about that and it isn't important. It's what I think and feel and what I want to see and find out and hear. And I'm going back there."

- **Mr Lamb does not pretend.** The other adults in Derry's life either avoid his face or look at it with pity. Mr Lamb, on the contrary, asks "you got burned in a fire" straightforwardly. Derry corrects him ("acid all down that side of my face"), but the very fact that the old man asks is a relief. Honesty, in a play full of polite avoidance, is a magnet.
- **Mr Lamb refuses the "poor boy" script.** Derry knows the script by heart: *Here's a boy. Poor boy.* Mr Lamb breaks the script in the opening minute. "Mind the apples," is his first line. He treats Derry as somebody who might step on a windfall, not as a wound on legs.
- **Mr Lamb makes disability ordinary.** "I've got a tin leg. Not important. You're standing there.... I'm sitting here. Where's the difference?" By placing his own missing leg next to Derry's burnt face, Mr Lamb normalises both. Derry has never had his condition treated as ordinary before, and the ease of it is hard to leave behind.
- **Mr Lamb makes the world larger.** The garden is full of crab apples, weeds, sun-flowers, bees, a spider on its silken ladder. Mr Lamb keeps directing Derry's attention outwards. For a boy who has been spending his time looking inwards at his own scar, that outward turn is a quiet rescue.
- **Mr Lamb listens.** "Bees singing. Him talking. . . . Things that matter. Things nobody else has ever said," Derry tells his mother. Most people speak *at* Derry; Mr Lamb speaks *with* him. The difference is the whole reason for the play.
- **Mr Lamb's loneliness is a mirror.** Mr Lamb's house has no curtains; he leaves the gate open; he calls every visitor "a friend". Derry senses, even if he does not say so, that Mr Lamb is as alone behind his garden wall as Derry is behind his face. Two solitudes recognise each other.

> **Final Answer:** Derry is drawn to Mr Lamb because Mr Lamb refuses to play the script the rest of the world plays around him: he neither pities Derry nor avoids the burnt face, he treats his own tin leg as ordinary, and he keeps redirecting Derry's attention to crab apples, weeds and sun-flowers rather than to the scar. Honesty, ordinariness, and the chance to be listened to draw the boy back, even though he tells himself he hates being with people.

☞ Exam Tip

For a long-answer question on a character's motivation, do not guess at feelings. Quote the lines that show those feelings. "Bees singing. Him talking. . . . Things nobody else has ever said" is one sentence that proves the answer.

EXPERT'S SOLUTION *: Dr Ananya Iyer, PhD English Literature, Jawaharlal Nehru University*

Strategic angle. Susan Hill is writing in the late radio-play tradition: short scenes, voices only, a single controlling image (in this case, the garden). Read the play as two adjacent loneliness studies (the disfigured adolescent and the lame old man) rather than a feel-good cross-generational friendship, and Derry's pull towards Mr Lamb becomes both more specific and more credible.

- Hill withholds Mr Lamb's full back-story on purpose. We get only "Real one got blown off, years back"; we never learn how the leg went, whether there was a wife, why the windows have no curtains beyond "I'm not fond of curtains. Shutting things. . . off." The blankness is the point: Mr Lamb is the kind of adult whose lack of a settled story leaves room for the boy.
- Notice how often Mr Lamb counters Derry's certainties with questions. "Why is one green, growing plant called a weed and another 'flower'?" "Where's the difference?" Derry has spent his life in the territory of fixed judgements about his face. Mr Lamb keeps unsettling those judgements without preaching.
- The garden is selected as a setting because it is full of ordinary, irreducible particulars: bees, sun-flowers, crab apples, a tin leg, a spider on its silken ladder. A character convinced that the world has narrowed to one scar can only be answered by a long, slow inventory of other things. The garden *is* that inventory.
- Mr Lamb's stock of proverbs and quotations ("Beauty and the beast", "Handsome is as handsome does") is deliberately the stock that has already been used against Derry. The old man knows these lines have failed; he offers them back as the questions they really are, not the consolations the world tries to make them.
- The single most magnetic thing about Mr Lamb is the equation "Crab apples or the weeds or a spider . . . or my tall sun-flowers" *and* "Like my face". He places Derry's face inside a list of ordinary marvels. Derry has never been allowed to belong to such

a list before. That is what makes him climb the wall a second time.

Why this matters. The play would not work if Mr Lamb were simply kind. The friendship is built on a refusal of pity, not on its supply. Read in that light, Derry's return at the end of the play is not a sentimental rescue; it is the only honest move available to a boy who has finally been spoken to as an equal.

> **Final Answer:** What draws Derry to Mr Lamb is Mr Lamb's refusal of all the scripts the world has used on the boy: pity, avoidance, false reassurance. In their place Mr Lamb offers honesty ("you got burned in a fire"), ordinariness (the tin leg), genuine questions ("where's the difference?") and a garden full of small particulars that crowd out the scar. The old man's own quiet loneliness is the second magnet, the one the play does not state but lets the audience feel.

Q 5.2 In which section of the play does Mr Lamb display signs of loneliness and disappointment? What are the ways in which Mr Lamb tries to overcome these feelings?

SOLUTION

Mr Lamb's loneliness surfaces most clearly in the first scene of the play, in the long stretch after Derry has agreed to stay and the conversation has loosened. The play does not let Mr Lamb weep or complain; the loneliness shows in small details that the careful reader notices.

> ☞ **Lines from the play**
>
> "The gate's always open. . . . I sit here. I like sitting."
>
> *Derry:* "Do you have any friends?" *Mr Lamb:* "Hundreds." . . . "Friends everywhere. People come in. . . everybody knows me. The gate's always open."
>
> "Sit in the sun. Read books. . . . you thought it was an empty house, but inside, it's full. Books and other things. Full."

- **The open gate.** Mr Lamb leaves the garden gate permanently unlocked and the house has no curtains. He is not protecting privacy; he is hoping for company. The architectural detail is the loneliness.
- **The whole-world-is-my-friend dodge.** When Derry asks "Do you have any friends?" Mr Lamb answers "Hundreds." He then widens the word until it is meaningless: "Friends everywhere. People come in. . . everybody knows me." Kids who come for the apples are friends; the postman is a friend. The widening is the giveaway. He has no one in particular.
- **The list of small tasks.** Mr Lamb fills his afternoons by sitting in the sun and reading

books, picking crab apples and making jelly, listening to bees. The life is full of small busy-ness precisely because there is no one waiting at the kitchen table.

- **The reaction to Derry running off.** When Derry shouts "I'm going. But I'll come back. You see. You wait... I'll be back," and runs out, Mr Lamb only murmurs to himself, "... I'll come back. They never do, though. Not them. Never do come back." That quiet, unargued admission, after a long conversation, is the clearest signal of disappointment in the play.
- **The accident in Scene Three.** Mr Lamb's last sound is the crash of the ladder. He had postponed the crab-apple picking to wait for Derry. The fall is, on one reading, the consequence of doing alone what he had hoped to do together.

To overcome these feelings the old man uses an entire small philosophy:

- **Hospitality without conditions.** The gate stays open, the garden is for "all welcome", the apples are shared. Mr Lamb manages loneliness by removing every obstacle to a possible visit.
- **Attention to nature.** Bees, sun-flowers, weeds, crab apples. He keeps his mind on small, irreducible things, the way a person keeps a candle lit in a long evening.
- **Reading and curiosity.** "There's nothing God made that doesn't interest me." Curiosity is an anti-loneliness strategy that does not depend on other people turning up.
- **Equanimity about teasing.** Children call him Lamey-Lamb. He has stopped minding. He absorbs cruelty rather than letting it close off the world.
- **Refusing self-pity.** "Not important. You're standing there... I'm sitting here. Where's the difference?" By placing his disability inside the ordinary furniture of the day, he keeps it from becoming the whole story.

> **Final Answer:** Mr Lamb's loneliness shows mainly in Scene One: the always-open gate, the curtain-less house, the "Hundreds... Friends everywhere" evasion when asked about specific friends, the long unbroken solitude of his afternoons, and the murmured "They never do, though... Never do come back" after Derry runs away. To overcome it he keeps the garden open to strangers, fixes his attention on crab apples and sun-flowers, reads books and listens to bees, ignores the cruel nickname "Lamey-Lamb", and refuses to let his tin leg become the whole of him. The strategy is largely successful, though the play's ending hints at its cost.

✗ Common Mistake

Do not say "Mr Lamb is not really lonely because he says the whole world is his friend." That sentence is precisely the evidence of loneliness. Examiners want you to read the line *against* its surface meaning.

EXPERT'S SOLUTION *: Mr Arjun Mehta, MA English, University of Delhi*

Strategic angle. Hill's writing for radio depends on what the listener notices in the gaps. Mr Lamb's loneliness is never said out loud; it is built out of small adjacent details (an open gate, an empty house, a curtain-less window, a slow afternoon). A strong answer should chase those details rather than quote the obvious lines.

- Begin by locating the loneliness precisely. It is densest in the long conversation in Scene One, after Derry has decided not to run. Hill places the loneliest material in the middle of the friendliest scene; that adjacency is deliberate.
- Notice that Mr Lamb's most sociable lines are also his loneliest. "Hundreds... Friends everywhere. People come in... everybody knows me" is generous and isolating at once. Sociability without specifics is a form of solitude.
- Read the books as a clue. "Sit in the sun. Read books... Books and other things. Full." Hill never names a title or an author. The unspecificity is the point: Mr Lamb is filling long afternoons with whatever is to hand, not engaging with a settled reading life.
- Listen to the architectural details. "I'm not fond of curtains. Shutting things... off." The curtain-less windows are not minimalism; they are an admission that there is no one indoors whose privacy needs protecting. The house, like the gate, has been re-designed for company that does not come.
- The garden is the play's central anti-loneliness machine. It produces visitors (kids who scrump the apples, a fourteen-year-old climbing the wall), it produces tasks (jelly, ladders, weeds), and it produces wonders (bees humming, sun-flowers, a spider on its silken ladder). The garden is what Mr Lamb has made instead of a family.
- Listen for the cruel nickname. Mr Lamb absorbs "Lamey-Lamb" from the kids without flinching, noting almost in the same breath that "they still come into the garden". The generosity is real, but it also tells the listener that the only steady traffic through his life is mocking children. Forgiveness, on these terms, is itself a measure of how little else there is.
- The accident at the end is the play's quiet refusal of easy resolution. A life built on hospitality and attention can be admirable and still lonely. The fall suggests that the strategies, though good, do not replace the company they substitute for.

Why this matters. Hill is writing in the long English tradition (think of Larkin, Stevie Smith, Beckett) of letting loneliness speak through the everyday. Read like that, Mr Lamb's small philosophy of crab apples and open gates is both a real remedy and an honest acknowledgement that some loneliness does not yield.

Final Answer: Mr Lamb's loneliness lives in the body of Scene One: in the open gate, the curtain-less house, the "Hundreds... Friends everywhere" evasion when asked about specific friends, the long unbroken reading and sitting, and the disappointed "They never do, though... Never do come back" that he murmurs after Derry runs out. He manages it by keeping the gate open, attending to bees, sun-flowers and crab apples, reading, absorbing the cruel nickname "Lamey-Lamb" without bitterness, and refusing self-pity about his tin leg. The ending hints, gently, that not all loneliness can be talked away.

Q 5.3 **The actual pain or inconvenience caused by a physical impairment is often much less than the sense of alienation felt by the person with disabilities. What is the kind of behaviour that the person expects from others?**

SOLUTION

The statement reads Hill's play correctly. Derry's burns no longer hurt; what hurts is being looked at. The whole point of his early speeches is that the wound is not the problem; the audience for the wound is. So the question is really asking what kind of audience the person with a disability hopes for.

☞ **Lines from the play**

"You think ... 'Here's a boy.' You look at me... and then you see my face and you think, 'That's bad. That's a terrible thing...' But I'm not. Not poor."

- **To be addressed, not stared at.** Derry's first complaint is the gaze: people look, look away, look back, pretend not to look. He wants to be spoken to normally, the way Mr Lamb speaks to him. Eye-contact and ordinary conversation are the simplest gift.
- **Honesty.** Derry asks Mr Lamb, "Why don't you ask me?" He prefers "you got burned in a fire" to the polite avoidance of grown-ups. Honest questions treat the disability as a fact, not a taboo.
- **Refusal of pity.** The word *poor* is the word Derry hates most. Pity replaces the person with the disability. He wants to be met as a fourteen-year- old, not as a case.
- **No false reassurance.** "It's not what you look like, it's what you are inside," is the line Derry has heard most often. He calls it "that fairy story". Reassurances that pretend the disability is invisible are themselves a form of denial.
- **Inclusion in ordinary activity.** Derry warms to Mr Lamb the moment he is offered a

task: "You could give me a hand," Mr Lamb says about the crab apples. Being asked to *do* something, like everyone else, is the practical form of acceptance.

- **Patience without surveillance.** Mr Lamb does not chase Derry, does not insist, does not check up on him. He simply tells him, "The gate's always open. . . Everything's yours if you want it." The person with a disability often wants the door left open without being supervised through it.
- **Treating the disability as part of the person, not the whole.** Mr Lamb's tin leg goes into a list with Derry's face, the spider's silken ladder and the sun-flowers. The disability is one feature among many, not the headline.

> **Final Answer:** The person with a disability hopes for an audience that addresses rather than stares, asks honest questions rather than avoids the subject, refuses both pity and false reassurance, includes them in ordinary tasks, leaves space without insisting on attention, and treats the disability as one feature among many. Derry's response to Mr Lamb is the playbook: he comes back to the only adult who has met him on those terms.

♥ Why This Matters

This question is not just literary. It is the country's everyday disability question. When you write your answer, allow one sentence about your own school or street: a classmate with a hearing aid, a neighbour in a wheelchair. Examiners reward answers that move from text to life.

EXPERT'S SOLUTION *: Ms Priya Sundaram, MA English, Madras Christian College*

Strategic angle. The statement separates two kinds of suffering, physical and social. Most policy and literature about disability now agrees that the second is the harder of the two to fix. A strong answer should keep that distinction sharp and should test each of Derry's complaints against it.

- Derry mentions his physical pain twice in the play and his social pain on almost every page. The play's whole weight is on the social side. Hill is dramatising the old social-model insight: disability is largely made by the way other people behave.
- Use the play's own taxonomy. Derry lists three social responses: pity ("poor boy"), staring ("everyone looks"), and false reassurance ("it's what you are inside"). The desired behaviour is the inverse of each: respect, eye-contact, honesty.
- Inclusion in tasks deserves its own bullet. Mr Lamb's "you could give me a hand" is, in social-model language, an offer of *participation*, the most important antidote to alienation. The person with a disability wants to be a working member of the room, not its guest.

- Patience is the second under-rated behaviour. The play models it carefully: Mr Lamb does not chase Derry, does not lecture him, does not call his mother. He waits. Waiting respects the person's pace.
- Close on the language point. Words such as *poor, terrible, ugly*, however well-intended, do real harm. The desired vocabulary is the one Mr Lamb uses: *boy, friend, where's the difference, you could give me a hand*. The disability question is partly a question of which sentences we choose.

Why this matters. The disability rights movement has spent decades making the point Susan Hill made in a short play: the wound heals; the looks do not. A school answer that catches that idea is doing more than literature; it is shaping a slightly kinder reader.

> **Final Answer:** The person with a disability expects ordinary address rather than staring, honest questions rather than avoidance, neither pity nor false reassurance, inclusion in shared work, patience that leaves room without surveillance, and a vocabulary that names them as a person first. The play offers Mr Lamb's behaviour with Derry as the model for almost every point on this list.

Q 5.4 Will Derry get back to his old seclusion or will Mr Lamb's brief association effect a change in the kind of life he will lead in the future?

SOLUTION

The play does not finish the answer. It ends with Mr Lamb's fall, Derry on his knees in the long grass, and the curtain on "Lamey-Lamb. I did... come back." The reader is left to weigh the evidence on both sides; the honest answer is a qualified *yes, but slowly*.

> ☞ **Derry's last visit, summarised**
>
> *Scene Two:* "I'm going back there. Only to help him with the crab apples. Only to look at things and listen. But I'm going."
> *Scene Three:* "You see, you see! I came back. You said I wouldn't and they said ... but I came back..."

- **Evidence for change.** Derry's decision to come back is the play's most important fact. He has defied his mother, climbed the garden wall a second time, and spoken the only complete sentence of self-assertion in the play ("If I don't go back there, I'll never go anywhere in this world again"). A boy who has named that need has already begun to change.
- **The language has shifted.** The first half of Derry's speech is full of *they*, *nobody*, *never*. By the time he leaves his mother's house he is speaking in *I want, I think, I feel*. Self- report has replaced self-pity.

- **The mother's veto has been refused.** Derry's scene with his mother is the small revolution. To go back to Mr Lamb against his mother's instruction is to do, for the first time, something that the world says he cannot do because of his face. That refusal is habit-forming.
- **The model has been seen.** Mr Lamb is the proof that a person with a visible disability can live a full, curious, kind, hospitable life. Once Derry has seen the model he has the option of trying it on, even after the old man is gone.
- **Counter-evidence: the fall.** The model dies (or at least falls silent) at the end of the play. Derry's most important source of encouragement is suddenly removed. A change that depended only on one friendly adult would now collapse.
- **Counter-evidence: the world is unchanged.** The children who taunted Mr Lamb ("Lamey-Lamb") will go on taunting Derry. The mother will still kiss him on the other side of his face. The conditions that produced his withdrawal are still in place.

The play, on balance, suggests that the change has begun but is not finished. The visible step is the return to the garden; the invisible step is the slow rearrangement of Derry's idea of himself, which the play does not have time to show. Hill is too careful a writer to promise a cure. She has shown an opening; the reader is asked to imagine the future on that basis.

> **Final Answer:** The play leaves the future open, but the weight of the evidence is that Mr Lamb's brief association has shifted Derry permanently. He has defied his mother, named his own need, climbed the wall a second time, and seen the model of a disabled adult who lives a full and curious life. The accident that ends the play removes Derry's main support, and the prejudiced world outside the garden is unchanged; the work of keeping the shift alive will be slow and largely his own. The old seclusion is unlikely to return in its earlier, total form, but the new openness will need to survive without Mr Lamb's company.

☞ Exam Tip

For "open-ending" questions, do not pick one side and ignore the other. Examiners reward an answer that weighs the evidence both ways, takes a clear final position, and uses the last line of the play as the hinge. "Lamey-Lamb. I did… come back" is that hinge.

EXPERT'S SOLUTION *: Dr Kavya Reddy, PhD British Drama, University of Hyderabad*

Strategic angle. The radio play is built to leave the listener with a question, not an answer. Treat the open ending as the answer's frame, not its frustration. The best response weighs the evidence both ways and lands on a careful, partial yes.

- Hill's last stage direction is precise: "Derry begins to weep." The weeping is the play's

clearest signal that something has moved in him. Derry has been described as defiant, angry, withdrawn; he has not been described as crying. The weeping is new, and new emotions are the sign of a shifted self.

- Note the small grammatical change in Derry's last speech: he speaks to Mr Lamb, not about him. "You said I wouldn't. . . but I came back." That second person is a relational sentence; Derry is now a boy in a conversation, not a boy in a soliloquy. Hill is showing the conversion under the surface of grief.
- The fall is not just plot. It is a small, hard image of what change costs. The old life of seclusion was easier; any return to it would also be easier. The fact that Derry runs *towards* the body, not away from it, is the play's quiet promise about which direction the boy is now facing.
- Hill is writing in the tradition of late-twentieth- century English realism. She does not believe in miracle cures; she believes in small, recoverable openings. Derry's future, on her terms, will be a long series of choices, each small and each made against the old pull of withdrawal.
- Close on the model. Mr Lamb has given Derry a *vocabulary* (crab apples, weeds, where's the difference) more than a personal friendship. Even after the old man is gone the vocabulary survives. Words can outlast their speaker; the play's final wager is on the durability of Mr Lamb's words inside Derry's head.

Why this matters. The play would be sentimental if it ended with Derry rescued and happy. It would be cynical if it ended with Derry rejoining the world unchanged. Hill chooses the middle, which is the realistic place. Real lives are changed by brief encounters, but slowly, and at cost; that is the play's honest report on what an afternoon in a garden can do.

> **Final Answer:** Mr Lamb's brief association has effected a real but unfinished change. Derry has defied his mother, named his own need, returned to the garden a second time, and reached for the old man's body rather than running away. The change will have to survive the fall, the world outside the gate, and the long years ahead, and it will do so only by holding on to the vocabulary Mr Lamb has handed him. The old seclusion is unlikely to return in its old completeness; the new openness will need constant, deliberate work.

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