

You Should Have Seen the Mess—Characters

Lorna Merrifield

The narrator is a lower-middle-class young woman, whose anxious maintaining of a prim gentility blinds her to real class and leads her to throw away a chance of happiness.

Her preoccupation with cleanliness colours every judgment she makes. She doesn't qualify for Grammar School, but prefers the Secondary Modern School because it is "more hygienic." At seventeen, she takes a typing job in a lawyer's office and finds little to recommend it except that the glass in the bookcase is clean. She "[keeps] in with" Dr. and Mrs. Darby in order to meet people, but complains about their children's shabby clothes and the chipped paint and "cracked lino" in their house. She likes Willy Morley, a well-to-do young artist, "in a way," but "his place [is] a terrible mess," and she was certain it will "break [her] heart to sink so low."

You Should Have Seen the Mess is a caricature—an exaggeration for effect. Lorna, totally lacking in humour, judges everyone by the shallowest of standards and finds no one who can measure up to her absurd expectations.

The protagonist's name is Lorna. (243)

She is "seventeen years of age, and left school two years ago last month". (242)

Five years ago Lorna does "not pass into the grammar school" (242).

It is a disappointment first, but now she is glad about it, because at her own school – the Secondary Modern School – there is a new building and therefore it is more hygienic. (242)

She is good at English, but "not so good at the other subjects". (242)

She has got an "A certificate for typing". (242)

She first works as a junior in a solicitor's office of an old-established firm but after a week stops working there. (242)

Now she works for Low's Chemical Co. (244)

She has got a younger brother, called Trevor. (244)

Lorna is very calculating: "I also kept in with¹ [the Darby's] for the opportunity of meeting people." (244)

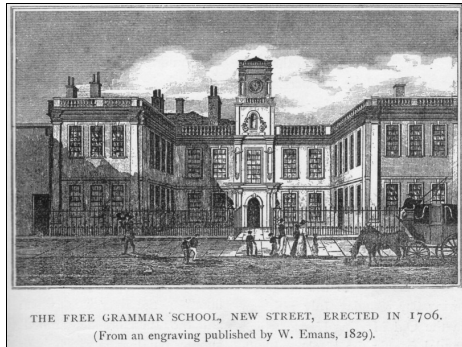
Often she feels embarrassed: "they had interesting conversation, although sometimes it gave me a surprise, and I did not know where to look." (245)

¹ *keep in with sb* to make sure that you stay friendly with sb, because you will get an advantage from doing so

Lorna's obsession with cleanliness

At **Grammar School** “the corridors were dusty” (242) and the classrooms are “very untidy”. (242)

The **Secondary Modern School** is “much more hygienic [...], light and airy, and the walls [are] painted with a bright, washable, gloss”. (242)



Grammar School, Birmingham.



Secondary Modern School, Liverpool.

Lorna comments on the **solicitor's office**: “I was surprised at the windows, and the stairs up to the offices were also far from clean. There was a little waiting-room, where some of the elements were missing from the gas fire, and the carpet on the floor was worn.” (242) In her own office “there was no floor covering whatsoever, and so dusty everywhere. [...] The worst shock of all was the [cracked] tea cups.” (243)

Lorna's home is admired by everybody, “because Mum keeps it spotless, and Dad keeps doing things to it.” (243) “Mum keeps everything beautiful.” (247)

In the **doctor's house** Lorna discovers “broken toys”, “ashtrays [...] full up” and “old-fashioned” furniture. (244)

“Those Darby children frequently looked like the Leary family, which the Council evicted from our block, as they were far from houseproud.” (244)

“I was sure the bedroom was not hygienic for having a baby.” (245)

“I can honestly say that **Willy's place** was the most unhygienic place I have seen in my life.” (247)

Lorna's obsession with habits

The I-narrator is worried about what Grammar School “does to one's habits”. (242)

Lorna takes it as an insult to be asked whether she watches *telly* in the evening because “[she and her parents] call it TV”. (243) Because of this remark she thinks that Mr Heygate makes “her out to be uneducated”. (243)

“[Mr Marwood] is well spoken.” (244)

“[The baby] began to cry, and without a word of a lie, Jim [Darby] said to him over his shoulder, ‘Oh shut your gob, you little bastard.’ [...] and Mavis [Darby] was smoking a cigarette.” (246)

Lorna's obsession with appearance

"Mr Gresham [a clerk] was far from smart in appearance." (243)

"Mr Marwood is very smart in appearance." (244)

"[The orphan] was quite clean in appearance. But there was only hot water at the weekend at his place, and he said that a bath once a week was sufficient." (245)

"[Willy] would not change his shirt very often, or get clothes, but he went round like a tramp." (247)

In the end Lorna decides not to marry Willy because of the following reasons:

"So it came to me, all of a sudden, what a fool I was, going with Willy. I agree to equality, but as to me marrying Willy, as I said to Mavis, when I recall his place, and the good carpet gone greasy, not to mention the paint oozing out of the tubes, I think it would break my heart to sink so low." (248)

Lorna's parents, Mr and Mrs Merrifield

Her parents' influence on Lorna is very strong; they might be supportive, but they have also passed on their own pathological obsession with cleanness, habits and appearance to Lorna. They do not allow any departure from their standards. However, apart from her parents, Lorna does not encounter any understanding of her situation.

Her parents comment on her first employment: "Mum was pleased at this, Dad said it was a first-class start." (242)

When her mum learns about the cracked cups she is upset and gives Lorna her own cup to take to the office: "because those cracks can harbour germs." (243)

"Next day, Saturday, I told Mum and Dad about the facilities, and we decided I should not go back to that job." (243)

Her mum keeps their home "spotless" (243), and her father re-modernises it on a regular basis. Dutifully, they ask for permission from the Council, and a Health Visitor says: "'You could eat off from your floor.' [...] any hour of the day or night you will find every corner spick and span." (243)

"Mum and Dad were pleased that I had made nice friends." (244)

"Dad has done one wall in a patterned paper [...]" (247)

"Mum keeps everything beautiful." (247)

Mr Heygate and his employees

In Mr Heygate office there is some old furniture, but it is polished and the bookcase is clean. (242)

“Mr Gresham [a clerk] was far from smart in appearance.” (243)

“Miss Bewlay showed me where [the cracked cups were] kept.” (243)

Mr Marwood (at Low Chemical Co.)

“Mr Marwood is very smart in appearance. He is well spoken, although he has not got a university education behind him.” (244)

Mr Jim Darby and Mrs Mavis Darby

“She was small, with fair hair, but too long, and a green maternity dress.” (244)

“Dr Darby is also short and fair.” (244)

Mrs Darby rebukes her son for peeing on the cabbages: “John, stop peeing over the cabbages at once. Pee on the lawn.” (245) Lorna finds this episode extremely embarrassing.

The Leary family

The Leary family is evicted from Lorna’s block because of their untidiness. (244)

The orphan

“[The Darby’s] had an idea to make a match for me with the chemist’s assistant.” (245)

“He was not accustomed to those little extras that I was.” (245)

“He was a good-looking boy [...] he was quite clean in appearance.” (245)

Willy Morley

“an artist” (246)

“He was young, dark, with a dark shirt, so one could not see right away if he was clean.” (246-247)

His place is “unhygienic”. (247)

“He had a nice way” (247)

“‘He has pots of money.’ [...] Willy came from a good family.” (247)

“They [...] thought Willy and I were getting married.” (247)

Finally Lorna decides not to go steady with him any longer. (248)