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| 151015202530 | Jean Logan led me into a cramped back room which gave on to an enormous walled garden dominated by a flowering cherry. She bent stiffly to gather up a blanket from the floor by a two-seater sofa whose cushions and covers were tangled and skewed. Bunching the blanket against her stomach with two hands she asked me if I would like some tea. I guessed she had been asleep when I rang the doorbell, or lying inert beneath her cover. When I offered to help her in the kitchen she laughed impatiently and told me to sit down.The air was so thick that breathing was a conscious effort. There was a gas fire on, burning yellow and probably leaking carbon monoxide. That and the holed-up sorrow. While Jean Logan was out of the room I tried to adjust the flame, and when that failed, I pushed open the french windows an inch or so, and then I straightened the cushions and sat down.There was nothing in the room to suggest that children lived here. Jammed into an alcove, weighed down with books and heaps of magazines and academic periodicals, was an upright piano whose candle holders bore some sprays of dried twigs, last year's buds perhaps. The books on either side of the chimney breast were uniform collected editions of Gibbon, Macaulay, Carlyle, Trevelyan and Ruskin. Along one wall was a dark leather chaise-longue with a gash in the side stuffed with yellowing newspapers. Layers of faded and thinning rugs covered the floor. Facing the poisonous fire, set opposite the sofa were two chairs of what I thought were forties design, with high wooden arm rests and low-slung boxy seats. Jean or John Logan had surely inherited the house unchanged from parents. I wondered whether the sense of sorrow in the place pre-dated John Logan's death.Jean returned with two workman's mugs of tea. I had by now prepared a little opening speech, but as soon as she was seated on the edge of her uncomfortable low chair she started in on her own.'I don't know why you've come,' she said. 'I hope it isn't to satisfy your curiosity. Since we don't know each other, I'd rather not hear condolences, consolations, that kind of thing, if you don't mind.' The attempt to say this without emotion conveyed it all the more powerfully by way of brisk and breathy phrasing. She tried to soften the effect by smiling wonkily and adding, 'I mean, I'm trying to save you the awkward bits.' |
| **Guiding Questions**How and for what purpose is the atmosphere developed in this extract?How are key themes of the work explored in this extract? |