

AQA GCSE English Literature

Activities and Exam Practice

Hobson's Choice

Shelagh Hubbard



Act 1

Stage setting: place and time

Place: the action takes place in a shoe shop, which is also a home (a door at the back of the stage leads to the rest of the house.) The shop looks *dingy but business-like*: the shop is busy but not 'posh'. The clogs on display in the window hint at the usual customers – working people employed in the mines and textile mills. The set would not tell you the place was Salford, but a local audience would quickly work this out from the accents of the



characters and place names like Chapel Street (p. 6) and Hope Hall (p.11.)

Time: the nineteenth century. The style of boots and the gas lights are clues, as are the costumes and hairstyles of the characters, with their long skirts and shop aprons. The bright light shining through the window shows it is midday. Alice's comment *He is late* tells you that Hobson often goes drinking before lunch.

Activity 1.1: The stage set

- 1 Reread page 1. Each act of this play opens with a detailed description of the stage setting. As you read, imagine you are in the audience watching the play in a theatre.
- 2 Sketch the stage set as you would see it from the audience.
- 3 Add labels to your sketch indicating what you learn about the place and the time.

The Hobson sisters

The first thing you notice about Alice and Vickey is that, even in their plain working clothes, they are stylish. Vickey, in particular, is very pretty. Although they are at work, during this slack moment in the shop Alice is knitting and Vickey is reading. The contrast with

Maggie is immediate. Her costume is less fashionable than theirs, plainer, older – like Maggie herself! And what Maggie does the minute she walks on stage is also a contrast: she sets to work, at the desk, with the shop's account book.

Activity 1.2: The Hobson sisters

- 1 Reread pages 1–2 (up to when Albert Prosser enters)
- 2 Sketch designs for the sisters' costumes for Act 1.
- 3 Label your designs to show how their character traits are reinforced by how they dress.
- 4 As you read on, compare these with costumes they wear later in the play.

Activity 1.3: Henry Hobson – first impressions

We learn quite a bit about Hobson before he comes on stage.

- 1 Give three pieces of evidence to prove he is not looking after his business properly.
- 2 What evidence hints that Alice and Vickey work in the shop mainly because they are afraid of their father?

Masons: Freemasons – a secret society for men, usually drawing members from those in the community with wealth and influence.

Albert Prosser – Maggie’s reluctant customer

The sisters' discussion about their father's night out and his need for *reviving* is interrupted by a visit from Albert Prosser, the young man who is courting Alice. Maggie's reaction is immediate: she sells him a pair of expensive boots and arranges for his old pair to be mended and sent home with the bill.

(Note the stage direction on page 2: Albert is the *son of an established solicitor*.) Maggie says she's *sick of the sight* of him and Alice courting in the shop. In her opinion, he should just get on and marry her if that is what they both want. *Courting must come first*, Alice

protests; in answer, Maggie picks up a fancy slipper likening it to courtship: *all glitter and no use to nobody*.

Activity 1.4: Maggie’s character

Reread pages 2–4 (to Hobson’s entry) Albert’s visit helps us to form a strong impression of Maggie’s character and her unconventional treatment of the men in her life. Complete the chart below to sum up evidence of each of her characteristics:

The characteristic	The quotation	My interpretation
Business-minded	<i>You’d better have the old pair mended and I’ll send them home to you with the bill.</i>	
Practical		
Unconventional		Maggie is physically as well as verbally assertive with Albert, where conventional ladylike behaviour was expected to be modest and submissive.
Determined		
Domineering	<i>Sit down ... Number eights from the third rack ...try it standing up... (She holds door open)</i>	
Unromantic		The down-to-earth simile is typical of Maggie and shows that she does not value things which have no practical use. It could also hint at jealousy of Alice’s relationship.
‘Master’ of the house? A substitute mother for her sisters?		

Hobson family life

We begin to build up a picture of family life in this household. In the absence of a mother, Hobson seems to be an over-protective father, to say the least. He has forbidden his daughters to have boyfriends and Alice seems very nervous of Albert being found in the shop at all.

Activity 1.5: Maggie’s role

Is Maggie, the eldest of the three girls, her father's second in command? Or does she behave more like a substitute mother for her sisters? Discuss your opinion and your reasons with a partner. Note down your conclusions at the end of your chart.