

## CONCOURS GÉNÉRAL DES LYCÉES

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SESSION 2015

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**COMPOSITION EN LANGUE ANGLAISE**

(Classes de terminale ES, L et S)

Durée : 5 heures

*L'usage de tout dictionnaire est interdit***Consignes aux candidats**

- Utiliser un stylo foncé
- N'utiliser ni colle, ni agrafe
- Numéroté chaque page en bas à droite (numéro de page / nombre total de pages)
- Sur chaque copie, renseigner l'en-tête + l'identification du concours :

Concours

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Section/Option

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Epreuve

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Matière

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**Tournez la page S.V.P.**

Left to myself I would have chosen to do a lazy English degree at a provincial university far to the north or west of my home. I enjoyed reading novels. I went fast – I could get through two or three a week – and doing that for three years would have suited me just fine. But at the time I was considered something of a freak of nature – a girl who happened to have a talent for mathematics. I wasn't interested in the subject, I took little pleasure in it, but I enjoyed being top, and getting there without much work. I knew the answers to questions before I even knew how I had got to them. While my friends struggled and calculated, I reached a solution by a set of floating steps that were partly visual, partly just a feeling for what was right. It was hard to explain how I knew what I knew. Obviously, an exam in maths was far less effort than one in English literature. And in my final year I was captain of the school chess team. You must exercise some historical imagination to understand what it meant for a girl in those times to travel to a neighbouring school and knock from his perch some condescending smirking squirt of a boy. However, maths and chess, along with hockey, pleated skirts and hymn-singing, I considered mere school stuff. I reckoned it was time to put away these childish things when I began to think about applying to university. But I reckoned without my mother.

She was the quintessence, or parody, of a vicar's then a bishop's wife – a formidable memory for parishioners' names and faces and gripes, a way of sailing down a street in her Hermès scarf, a kindly but unbending manner with the daily and the gardener. Faultless charm on any social scale, in any key. How knowingly she could level with the tight-faced, chain-smoking women from the housing estates when they came for the Mothers' and Babies' Club in the crypt. How compellingly she read the Christmas Eve story to the Barnardo's children gathered at her feet in our drawing room. With what natural authority she put the Archbishop of Canterbury at his ease when he came through once for tea and Jaffa cakes after blessing the restored cathedral font. Lucy and I were banished upstairs for the duration of his visit. All this – and here is the difficult part – combined with utter devotion and subordination to my father's cause. She promoted him, served him, eased his way at every turn. From boxed socks and ironed surplice hanging in the wardrobe, to his dustless study, to the profoundest Saturday silence in the house when he wrote his sermon. All she demanded in return – my guess, of course – was that he love her or, at least, never leave her.

But what I hadn't understood about my mother was that buried deep beneath this conventional exterior was the hardy little seed of a feminist. I'm sure that word never passed her lips, but it made no difference. Her certainty frightened me. She said it was my duty as a woman to go to Cambridge to study maths. As a woman? In those days, in our milieu, no one ever spoke like that. No woman did anything 'as a woman'. She told me she would not permit me to waste my talent. I was to excel and become extraordinary. I must have a proper career in science or engineering or economics. She allowed herself the world-oyster cliché. It was unfair on my sister that I was both clever and beautiful when she was neither. It would compound the injustice if I failed to aim high. I didn't follow the logic of this, but I said nothing. My mother told me she would never forgive me and she would never

forgive herself if I went off to read English and became no more than a slightly better educated housewife than she was. I was in danger of *wasting my life*. Those were her words, and they represented an admission. This was the only time she expressed or implied dissatisfaction with her lot.

40 Then she enlisted my father – ‘the Bishop’ was what my sister and I called him. When I came in from school one afternoon my mother told me he was waiting for me in his study. In my green blazer with its heraldic crest and emblazoned motto – *Nisi Dominus Vanum* (Without the Lord All Is in Vain) – I sulkily lolled in his clubbish leather armchair while he presided at his desk, shuffling papers, humming to himself as he ordered his thoughts. I thought he was about to rehearse for me the parable  
45 of the talents, but he took a surprising and practical line. He had made some inquiries. Cambridge was anxious to be seen to be ‘opening its gates to the modern egalitarian world’. With my burden of triple misfortune – a grammar school, a girl, an all-male subject – I was certain to get in. If, however, I applied to do English there (never my intention; the Bishop was always poor on detail) I would have a far harder time. Within a week my mother had spoken to my headmaster. Certain subject teachers  
50 were deployed and used all my parents’ arguments as well as some of their own, and of course I had to give way.

Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth*, 2012

## I. Questions

1. What kind of a woman was the narrator’s mother?
2. What literary techniques and devices are used to create a sense of critical distance in the narrator’s voice?
3. Discuss the ways in which gender roles and stereotypes are presented in the passage.
4. Do you believe it is the purpose of literature to engage in political or social issues? Support and illustrate your answer with references to fiction, drama or poetry.

## II. Translation

Translate into French from “Left to myself I would have chosen” (line 1) down to “But I reckoned without my mother” (line 14).

