

THE CONE GATHERERS — STUDY GUIDE

1. Introduction

- **Author:** Robin Jenkins
 - **Published:** 1955
 - **Genre:** Scottish Novel / Allegory / Psychological & Social Realism
 - **Setting:** A Scottish estate during WWII
 - **Premise:** Two brothers, Calum and Neil, gather cones to help replenish the forest for the war effort while facing hostility from the estate's gamekeeper, Duror.
 - **Why it's studied:** Rich symbolism, powerful themes (good vs evil, class, innocence), strong character contrasts, and an intense moral ending.
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2. Plot Summary

Overview

Set over a few autumn days in 1943, the novel follows two cone-gathering brothers whose peaceful, innocent labour in the woods clashes with the inner turmoil and hatred of Duror, the gamekeeper. Their interactions with the aristocratic Runcie-Campbell family highlight class conflict, morality, and the impact of war.

Story Summary

- **Calum and Neil**, brothers working in the woods, gather cones to help replant trees before the forest is felled for the war effort.
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- **Duror**, the gamekeeper, harbours a pathological hatred of Calum because of his deformity, linking it to resentment from his own troubled marriage.
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- **Lady Runcie-Campbell**, the estate owner, insists on class hierarchy, while her son **Roderick** sees the brothers as equals.
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- The conflict culminates during the **deer drive**, where Duror's mental breakdown becomes visible.
[\[studylib.net\]](#)

- The tragic final moment occurs when **Calum is found dead, hanging from a tree**, killed by Duror, who then takes his own life.
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3. Setting & Context

- **Time:** 1943, during WWII
 - **Place:** A Scottish Highlands estate
 - **Contextual relevance:**
 - Jenkins wrote from his experience as a forestry conscientious objector during WWII. [\[everything...ined.today\]](#)
 - Themes mirror social tensions and class divides of wartime Britain.
 - **Symbolic setting:**
 - The **woods** represent renewal (new cones replacing felled trees), but also moral testing.
 - The **beach hut** symbolises social inequality and moral decay. [\[studylib.net\]](#)
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4. Characters

Calum

- Innocent, gentle, compassionate towards nature
- Carved as a Christ-like figure: purity, sacrifice
- Symbol of goodness and humanity
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Neil

- Calum's protective older brother
- Resentful of class inequality and hardship
- Represents human dignity in the face of injustice

Duror

- Gamekeeper consumed by inner darkness
- Hatred of deformity rooted in his wife's illness and his own guilt
- Symbolises evil, corruption, and psychological breakdown
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Lady Runcie-Campbell

- Aristocratic, strict, class-bound
- Torn between Christian conscience and social expectations
- Moral failure highlighted during beach-hut incident
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Roderick

- Her son; idealistic, moral equalist
 - Symbol of hope and fairness
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5. Themes

Good vs Evil

- Calum = innocence; Duror = corruption.
- Their conflict drives the novel's moral message.
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Class Conflict

- Sharp divisions between estate workers and upper classes.
- The beach-hut incident shows Lady Runcie-Campbell prioritising class over compassion.
[\[studylib.net\]](#)

Nature

- Forest = renewal, purity, sanctuary.
- Calum's affinity with animals contrasts with Duror's hatred.
[\[slideshare.net\]](#)

Religion & Sacrifice

- Calum is associated with Christ-like symbolism, especially in his death.
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War & Violence

- Background war mirrors personal conflict.
 - Moral decay in the estate echoes global turmoil.
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6. Form, Structure & Language

Form

- Third-person narrative with psychological depth
- Allegorical elements (Garden of Eden, biblical allusions)
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Structure

- Short time frame → heightened tension
- Key turning points:
 - opening tree-gathering scene
 - rabbit snare scene
 - the deer drive
 - the beach hut
 - final death scene[\[studylib.net\]](#)

Language

- Rich nature imagery (trees, animals, seasons)
 - Symbolic motifs: cones, deer, storm, dolls
 - Contrasts (light/dark, innocence/corruption)
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7. Key Quotations

On Calum's innocence

- *"He could not watch an animal in distress."*
→ Shows purity and compassion. [\[slideshare.net\]](#)

On Duror's hatred

- *"A noose of disgust."*
→ Metaphor for internal torment. [\[slideshare.net\]](#)

On class division

- Beach hut incident highlights moral failure of upper classes.
(Lady Runcie-Campbell's rejection described in thematic notes.)
[\[studylib.net\]](#)

Foreshadowing & inevitability

- Weather as storm imagery before deer drive, reflecting rising conflict.
[\[studylib.net\]](#)

Final symbolism

- Calum's death = crucifixion imagery.
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8. Symbolism & Motifs

The Woods

- Garden of Eden symbolism
- Place of innocence but also moral testing
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Calum

- Christ-like innocence; sacrificial figure
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Duror

- Serpent in the Eden parallel; symbol of darkness
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Roderick

- Symbol of equality and hope
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The Cones

- Renewal and regeneration; rebuilding after destruction
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The Beach Hut

- Social injustice; hypocrisy of Christian values
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9. Important Scenes

1. Opening in the Trees

Introduces innocence (Calum) vs bitterness (Neil) and wartime context.

[\[bookey.app\]](#)

2. Rabbit Snare Incident

Reveals Calum's compassion and Duror's hatred.

[\[slideshare.net\]](#)

3. Beach Hut

Lady Runcie-Campbell's moral failing; symbolic storm.

[\[studylib.net\]](#)

4. Deer Drive

Duror's psychotic breakdown → "point of no return."

[\[studylib.net\]](#)

5. Calum's Death

Climactic moment symbolising innocence destroyed; Duror's suicide.

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10. Writer's Purpose

Robin Jenkins explores:

- moral conflict in wartime Scotland
 - class inequality and hypocrisy
 - the fragility of goodness in a corrupt world
 - the destructive nature of hatred
 - the potential for renewal through innocence (symbolised by Calum and the cones)
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11. Sample Essay Questions

- **Theme:** How does Jenkins explore the conflict between good and evil?
 - **Character:** Analyse Duror as a symbol of moral corruption.
 - **Setting:** How does the woodland setting reinforce themes of innocence and destruction?
 - **Symbolism:** Discuss the symbolic significance of Calum's death.
 - **Turning Point:** Why is the deer drive essential to the novel?
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12. Model PEA Paragraph

Point: Jenkins uses the deer drive to expose Duror's descent into uncontrollable hatred.

Evidence: The scene is described as the moment where Duror's "madness is exposed to everyone."

Analysis: The deer drive symbolises a violent rupture in the estate's fragile social order. Duror's breakdown reveals the danger of repressed hatred and foreshadows the novel's tragic conclusion. [\[studylib.net\]](https://www.studylib.net)

13. Quick-Revision Checklist

- **Themes:** good vs evil, class, nature, innocence, religion, war
- **Symbols:** woods, Calum as Christ-figure, serpent-like Duror, cones, storm, doll
- **Characters:** Calum, Neil, Duror, Lady Runcie-Campbell, Roderick
- **Key quotes:** "noose of disgust"; compassion for animals; storm symbolism; beach-hut confrontation
- **Turning points:** rabbit snare → beach hut → deer drive → Calum's death

MINI-ESSAYS

Theme: Goodness and Evil

Jenkins sets Calum and Duror as moral opposites in a symbolic landscape. Calum embodies innocence and compassion, associated with nature and healing; Duror represents internal rot, his hatred growing like "a tree with its roots in his mind." The woods become an arena where good

and evil clash, with the cones symbolising regeneration and continuity. Duror's obsession with destroying Calum reflects wider human capacity for cruelty, especially when sanctioned by class prejudice on the estate. The deer-hunt scene reveals their moral divide: Calum weeps for the creature; Duror exults in its suffering. Lady Runcie-Campbell's inability to see past hierarchy becomes complicity. Calum's death—cruciform, sacrificial—suggests that innocence is often destroyed by corrupted power. Yet the forest's purpose of renewal hints at hope: goodness may die, but its legacy remains. Jenkins turns a small Highland estate into a universal moral fable.

Turning Point

A. Turning Point: The Deer Hunt

The deer's killing shifts Duror's private hatred into public sadism, while Calum's compassion exposes their moral polarity. After this, Duror's obsession seeks a sacrificial victim; the estate's rigid class order enables him. The hunt reveals the novel's thesis: violence against nature licenses violence against the innocent.

B. Symbolism: Cones, Trees, Gun

- **Cones:** renewal; Calum's work as stewardship of life.
- **Trees:** moral stature—some shelter, some rot (Duror's "tree" image).
- **Gun:** institutional power; the estate's sanction of harm.

C. Setting Analysis

A wartime Highland estate: beauty overlaid with militarised discipline. The woods are simultaneously sanctuary and stage—nature as judge.
