



SAILMAKER — STUDY GUIDE

Author: Alan Spence

Published: 1982

Genre: Scottish Drama / Social Realism

Setting: Working-class Glasgow (1960s–70s)

Why it's studied: Clear themes, relatable Scottish context, emotional father-son relationship, symbolism, and accessible dramatic structure.

1. Introduction

Sailmaker follows **Alec** and his father **Davie** after the death of Alec's mother. The play explores poverty, religion, aspiration, community, and the fragility of relationships. Written in Scots/Glaswegian dialect, it is a staple of the SQA Scottish Text list for National 5.

2. Plot Summary

Overview

The play is a memory-based drama in which adult Alec looks back on his childhood with Davie. It traces the family's struggle to cope emotionally and financially as Davie loses work, sinks into disillusion, and turns to gambling, while Alec pursues education as a way out.

Key Plot Stages

Opening

- Alec recalls his mother's death.
- Davie is struggling — unemployed, proud, hopeful but insecure.
- They live in a run-down tenement.

Middle

- Davie tries to earn money by repairing sails but sailing work has died out.
- He becomes a bingo "beetle" collecting money — humiliating work.
- Alec excels at school and is encouraged to aim higher.
- Tension between Alec's education and Davie's lack of opportunity grows.

Climax

- Davie's gambling addiction worsens; he bets their money and loses.
- Alec sees how unreliable Davie is and feels forced to grow up quickly.

Ending

- Alec reflects as an adult, looking back with compassion but recognising his father's limitations.
 - The sail Davie never finished becomes a symbol of lost potential.
-

3. Setting & Context

Glasgow working-class life

- High unemployment
- Decline of traditional industries (like sail-making)
- Harsh economic realities for families

Religion

- Alec explores religion as comfort and meaning.
- Eventually becomes disillusioned as his life becomes dominated by survival and reality.

Masculinity

- Davie struggles with pride, failure, and societal expectations of men as providers.
-

4. Characters

Alec

- Sensitive, clever, ambitious
- Represents education and hope
- Narrates the play through memory
- Gradually loses innocence

Davie

- Alec's father; gentle but unreliable

- Haunted by loss and failure
- Turns to gambling and nostalgia
- Symbolises declining working-class masculinity

Ian

- Alec's friend; more typical of their community
- Suggests alternative path Alec might have taken

Billy

- Davie's brother; pragmatic and hard-working
- Represents stability but also limited horizons

5. Themes

Poverty and Struggle

Hardship shapes every aspect of the characters' lives: job loss, hunger, cold, poor housing.

Education and Opportunity

Alec uses education to escape; it becomes the central divide between father and son.

Family and Relationships

Davie loves Alec, but his emotional weakness and gambling undermine the family.

Religion and Faith

Alec's brief religious phase shows his search for meaning; he ultimately rejects organised religion.

Masculinity and Identity

Davie wrestles with pride and failure; his inability to provide crushes him emotionally.

Hope vs Disillusionment

Dreams (the sail, the past, religion) are contrasted with harsh reality.

6. Form, Structure & Language

Form

- Memory play; adult Alec narrates
- Episodic scenes showing key moments

Structure

- Three-part emotional arc:
Hope → **Decline** → **Reflection**
- Sail motif appears throughout, culminating in symbolic conclusion

Language

- Mix of Scots and Standard English
 - Naturalistic dialogue capturing working-class speech
 - Symbolic language around the sail, light, and fire
-

7. Key Quotations

On poverty

- "Cold in here."
→ Repeated motif; physical hardship = emotional strain.

On Davie's decline

- "Ah've goat ma pride."
→ Shows Davie's stubbornness and insecurity.

On religion

- "Ah didnae ken whit tae pray for."
→ Alec's confusion and loss of faith.

On gambling

- "Just one good win, son."
→ Davie's tragedy: hope misplaced in luck, not effort.

On the sail

- "It was gonnae be a great big sail..."
→ Symbol of dreams that never materialise.
-

8. Symbolism & Motifs

The Sail

- Davie's lost dreams
- Decline of old industries
- Alec's longing for stability and meaning

Light / Darkness

- Light = hope, education
- Darkness = poverty, despair

Religion

- Represents innocence; later replaced by realism and cynicism

Fire / Burning

- Fireplace scenes emphasise coldness of home, emotional and physical
-

9. Important Scenes

- The memory opening (establishes nostalgic tone)
- Davie losing his job
- Alec's religious phase
- Davie gambling the wages
- Billy confronting Davie
- Final reflection about the sail

These scenes show the emotional power struggle between father and son.

10. Writer's Purpose

Spence aims to:

- Expose the realities of Glasgow working-class poverty
 - Show the generational divide caused by education
 - Highlight emotional fragility in men
 - Portray complex but loving family relationships
 - Show that dreams alone are not enough without support and opportunity
-

11. Sample Essay Questions

- **Theme:** How does Spence explore the effects of poverty in *Sailmaker*?
 - **Character:** Analyse Davie's decline throughout the play.
 - **Symbolism:** Discuss the symbolic role of the sail.
 - **Turning Point:** What is the significance of Davie's gambling?
 - **Setting:** How does Glasgow shape the characters' lives?
-

12. Model PEA Paragraph

Point: Spence uses the sail to symbolise Davie's failed dreams and the decline of old Scottish industries.

Evidence: Davie describes it as "a great big sail," but never completes it.

Analysis: The unfinished sail represents Davie's inability to move forward after personal and economic hardship. This symbol also reflects Alec's growing awareness that his father's dreams — like many working-class ambitions of the time — are no longer possible.

13. Quick-Revision Checklist

- **Themes:** poverty, dreams, family, education, masculinity
- **Characters:** Alec, Davie, Billy, Ian
- **Symbols:** sail, light, cold, religion
- **Key quotes:** pride, coldness, "one good win," the sail
- **Turning points:** job loss, gambling, Alec's faith crisis



DRAMA — SQA-style Model Mini-Essay

Sailmaker (Alan Spence) — Theme: Working-class aspiration and loss

In *Sailmaker*, Spence charts the decline of Glasgow's traditional industries through Davie and his son Alec, revealing how economic loss corrodes dignity but cannot extinguish hope. The **yacht** model that Alec wants repaired symbolises aspiration; its gradual deterioration mirrors Davie's stalled prospects and moral drift into betting and avoidance. Episodic snapshots—school, chapel, the bookie's—accumulate to show a city where institutions promise salvation yet offer little practical change. Spence's restrained dialogue lets silence do the accusing: Davie's evasions, his inability to fix either the yacht or his life, hurt more because he is not a brute but a tired, decent man. Alec's education becomes both escape route and source of guilt; he loves his father, yet must outgrow him. The final image of a **faltering light bulb** captures the ambivalent ending—flicker of illumination, not miracle. Spence refuses sentimentality: shipyards won't return, and no heroic speech fixes poverty. Still, Alec's persistence—books, work, imagination—suggests a new kind of sail can be raised. The play's compactness is its strength: in brief, ordinary scenes, it shows how class, faith, and family can both steady and sink us, and how love sometimes looks like leaving.
