Name:_____ Teacher:_____

Short Stories

The Darkness Out There

PENELOPE LIVELY

She walked through flowers, the girl, ox-eye daisies and vetch and cow parsley, keeping to the track at the edge of the field. She could see the cottage in the distance, shrugged down into the dip beyond the next hedge. Mrs Rutter, Pat had said, Mrs Rutter at Nether Cottage, you don't know her, Sandra? She's a dear old thing, all on her own, of course, we try to keep an eye. A wonky leg after her op and the home help's off with a bad back this week. So could you make that your Saturday afternoon session, dear? Lovely. There'll be one of the others, I'm not sure who.

Pat had a funny eye, a squint, so that her glance swerved away from you as she talked. And a big chest jutting under washed-out jerseys. Are people who help other people always not very nice looking? Very busy being busy; always in a rush. You didn't get people like Mrs Carpenter at the King's Arms running the Good Neighbours' Club. People with platinum highlights and spike-heel suede boots.

She looked down at her own legs, the girl, bare brown legs brushing through the grass, polleny summer grass that glinted in the sun.

She hoped it would be Susie, the other person. Or Liz. They could have a good giggle, doing the floors and that. Doing her washing, this old Mrs Rutter.

They were all in the Good Neighbours' Club, her set at school. Quite a few of the boys, too. It had become a sort of craze, the thing to do. They were really nice, some of the old people. The old folks, Pat called them. Pat had done the notice in the library: Come and have fun giving a helping hand to the old folks. Adopt a granny. And the jokey cartoon drawing of a dear old bod with specs on the end of her nose and a shawl. One or two of the old people had been a bit sharp about that.

The track followed the hedge round the field to the gate and the plank bridge over the stream. The dark reach of the spinney came right to the gate there so that she would have to walk by the edge of it with the light suddenly shutting off the bare wide sky of the field. Packer's End.

You didn't go by yourself through Packer's End if you could help it, not after tea- time, anyway. A German plane came down in the war and the aircrew were killed and there were people who'd heard them talking still, chattering in German on their radios, voices coming out of the trees, nasty, creepy. People said.

She kept to the track, walking in the flowers with corn running in the wind between her and the spinney. She thought suddenly of blank-eyed helmeted heads, looking at you from among branches. She wouldn't go in there for a thousand pounds, not even in bright day like now, with nothing coming out of the dark slab of trees but birdsong – blackbirds and thrushes and robins and that. It was a rank place, all whippy saplings and brambles and a gully with a dumped mattress and bedstead and an old fridge. And, somewhere, presumably, the crumbling rusty scraps of metal and cloth and … bones?

It was all right out here in the sunshine. Fine. She stopped to pick grass stems out of her sandal; she saw the neat print of the strap-marks against her sunburn, pink- white on brown. Somebody had said she had pretty feet, once; she looked at them, clean and plump and neat on the grass. A ladybird crawled across a toe.

When they were small, six and seven and eight, they'd been scared stiff of Packer's End. Then, they hadn't known about the German plane. It was different things then; witches and wolves and tigers. Sometimes they'd go there for a dare, several of them, skittering over the field and into the edge of

the trees, giggling and shrieking, not too far in, just far enough for it to be scary, for the branch shapes to look like faces and clawed hands, for the wolves to rustle and creep in the greyness you couldn't quite see into, the clotted shifting depths of the place.

But after, lying on your stomach at home on the hearthrug watching telly with the curtains drawn and the dark shut out, it was cosy to think of Packer's End, where you weren't.

After they were twelve or so the witches and wolves went away. Then it was the German plane. And other things too. You didn't know who there might be around, in woods and places. Like stories in the papers. Girl attacked on lonely road. Police hunt rapist. There was this girl, people at school said, this girl some time back who'd been biking along the field path and these two blokes had come out of Packer's End. They'd had a knife, they'd threatened to carve her up, there wasn't anything she could do, she was at their mercy. People couldn't remember what her name was, exactly, she didn't live round here any more. Two enormous blokes, sort of gypsy types.

She put her sandal back on. She walked through the thicker grass by the hedge and felt it drag at her legs and thought of swimming in warm seas. She put her hand on the top of her head and her hair was hot from the sun, a dry burning cap. One day, this year, next year, sometime, she would go to places like on travel brochures and run into a blue sea. She would fall in love and she would get a good job and she would have one of those new Singers that do zig-zag stitch and make an embroidered silk coat.

One day.

Now, she would go to this old Mrs Rutter's and have a bit of a giggle with Susie and come home for tea and wash her hair. She would walk like this through the silken grass with the wind seething the corn and the secret invisible life of birds beside her in the hedge. She would pick a blue flower and examine its complexity of pattern and petal and wonder what it was called and drop it. She would plunge her face into the powdery plate of an elderflower and smell cat, tom-cat, and sneeze and scrub her nose with the back of her hand. She would hurry through the gate and over the stream because that was a bit too close to Packer's End for comfort and she would …

He rose from the plough beyond the hedge.

She screamed.

'Christ!' she said, 'Kerry Stevens you stupid so-and-so, what d'you want to go and do that for, you give me the fright of my life.'

He grinned. 'I seen you coming. Thought I might as well wait.'

Not Susie. Not Liz either. Kerry Stevens from Richmond Way. Kerry Stevens that none of her lot reckoned much on, with his black licked-down hair and slitty eyes. Some people you only have to look at to know they're not up to much.

'Didn't know you were in the Good Neighbours.'

He shrugged. They walked in silence. He took out an Aero bar, broke off a bit, offered it. She said oh, thanks. They went chewing towards the cottage, the cottage where old Mrs Rutter with her wonky leg would be ever so pleased to see them because they were really sweet, lots of the old people. Ever so grateful, the old poppets, was what Pat said, not that you'd put it quite like that yourself.

'Just give it a push, the door. It sticks, see. That's it.'

She seemed composed of circles, a cottage-loaf of a woman, with a face below which chins collapsed one into another, a creamy smiling pool of a face in which her eyes snapped and darted.

'Tea, my duck?' she said. 'Tea for the both of you? I'll put us a kettle on.'

The room was stuffy. It had a gaudy lino floor with the pattern rubbed away in front of the sink and round the table; the walls were cluttered with old calendars and pictures torn from magazines; there was a smell of cabbage. The alcove by the fireplace was filled with china ornaments: big-eyed flopeared rabbits and beribboned kittens and flowery milkmaids and a pair of naked chubby children wearing daisy chains.

The woman hauled herself from a sagging armchair. She glittered at them from the stove, manoeuvring cups, propping herself against the draining-board. 'What's your names, then? Sandra and Kerry. Well, you're a pretty girl, Sandra, aren't you. Pretty as they come. There was – let me see, who was it? – Susie, last week. That's right, Susie.' Her eyes investigated, quick as mice. 'Put your jacket on the back of the door, dear, you won't want to get that messy. Still at school, are you?'

The boy said, 'I'm leaving, July. They're taking me on at the garage, the Blue Star. I been helping out there on and off, before.'

Mrs Rutter's smiles folded into one another. Above them, her eyes examined him. 'Well, I expect that's good steady money if you'd nothing special in mind. Sugar?'

There was a view from the window out over a bedraggled garden with the stumps of spent vegetables and a matted flower bed and a square of shaggy grass. Beyond, the spinney reached up to the fence, a no-man's-land of willowherb and thistle and small trees, growing thicker and higher into the full density of woodland. Mrs Rutter said, 'Yes, you have a look out, aren't I lucky – right up beside the wood. Lovely it is in the spring, the primroses and that. Mind, there's not as many as there used to be.'

The girl said, 'Have you lived here for a long time?'

'Most of my life, dear. I came here as a young married woman, and that's a long way back, I can tell you. You'll be courting before long yourself, I don't doubt. Like bees round the honeypot, they'll be.'

The girl blushed. She looked at the floor, at her own feet, neat and slim and brown. She touched, secretly, the soft skin of her thigh; she felt her breasts poke up and out at the thin stuff of her top; she licked the inside of her teeth, that had only the one filling, a speck like a pin-head. She wished there was Susie to have a giggle with, not just Kerry Stevens.

The boy said, 'What'd you like us to do?'

His chin was explosive with acne; at his middle, his jeans yawned from his T-shirt, showing pale chilly flesh. Mrs Rutter said, 'I expect you're a nice strong boy, aren't you? I daresay you'd like to have a go at the grass with the old mower. Sandra can give this room a do, that would be nice, it's as much as I can manage to have a dust of the ornaments just now, I can't get down to the floor.'

When he had gone outside the girl fetched broom and mop and dustpan from a cupboard under the narrow stair. The cupboard, stacked with yellowing newspapers, smelt of damp and mouse. When she returned, the old woman was back in the armchair, a composite chintzy mass from which cushions oozed and her voice flowed softly on. 'That's it, dear, you just work round, give the corners a brush, if you don't mind, that's where the dust settles. Mind your pretty skirt, pull it up a bit, there's only me to see if you're showing a bit of bum. That's ever such a nice style, I expect your mum made it, did she?'

The girl said, 'Actually I did.'

'Well now, fancy! You're a little dressmaker, too, are you? I was good with my needle when I was younger, my eyesight's past it now, of course. I made my own wedding dress, ivory silk with lace insets. A Vogue pattern it was, with a sweetheart neckline.'

The door opened. Kerry said, 'Where'll I put the clippings?'

'There's the compost heap down the bottom, by the fence. And while you're down there could you get some sticks from the wood for kindling, there's a good lad.'

When he had gone she went on, 'That's a nice boy. It's a pity they put that stuff on their hair these days, sticky-looking. I expect you've got lots of boyfriends, though, haven't you?'

The girl poked in a crack at a clump of fluff. 'I don't really know Kerry that much.'

'Don't you, dear? Well, I expect you get all sorts, in your club thing, the club that Miss Hammond runs.'

'The Good Neighbours. Pat, we call her.'

'She was down here last week. Ever such a nice person. Kind. It's sad she never married.'

The girl said, 'Is that your husband in the photo, Mrs Rutter?'

'That's right, dear. In his uniform. The Ox and Bucks. After he got his stripes. He was a lovely man.'

She sat back on her heels, the dustpan on her lap. The photo was yellowish, in a silver frame. 'Did he …?'

'Killed in the war, dear. Right at the start. He was in one of the first campaigns, in Belgium, and he never came back.'

The girl saw a man with a toothbrush moustache, his army cap slicing his forehead. 'That's terrible.'

'Tragic. There was a lot of tragedies in the war. It's nice it won't be like that for you young people nowadays. Touch wood, cross fingers. I like young people, I never had any children, it's been a loss, that, I've got a sympathy with young people.'

The girl emptied the dustpan into the bin outside the back door. Beyond the fence, she could see the bushes thrash and Kerry's head bob among them. She thought, rather him than me, but it's different for boys, for him anyway, he's not a nervy type, it's if you're nervy you get bothered about things like Packer's End.

She was nervy, she knew. Mum always said so.

Mrs Rutter was rummaging in a cupboard by her chair. 'Chocky? I always keep a few chockies by for visitors.' She brought out a flowered tin. 'There. Do you know, I've had this twenty years, all but. Look at the little cornflowers. And the daisies.

They're almost real, aren't they?'

'Sweet,' said the girl.

'Take them out and see if what's-'is-name would like one.'

There was a cindery path down the garden, ending at a compost heap where eggshells gleamed among leaves and grass clippings. Rags of plastic fluttered from sticks in a bed of cabbages. The girl picked her way daintily, her toes wincing against the cinders. A place in the country. One day she would have a place in the country, but not like this. Sometime. A little white house peeping over a hill, with a stream at the bottom of a crisp green lawn and an orchard with old apple trees and a brown pony. And she would walk in the long grass in this orchard in a straw hat with these two children, a boy and a girl, children with fair shiny hair like hers, and there'd be this man.

She leaned over the fence and shouted, 'Hey …'

'What?'

She brandished the box.

He came up, dumping an armful of sticks. 'What's this for, then?'

'She said. Help yourself.'

He fished among the sweets, his fingers etched with dirt. 'I did a job on your dad's car last week. That blue Escort's his, isn't it?'

'Mmn.'

'July, I'll be starting full-time. When old Bill retires. With day-release at the tech.'

She thought of oily workshop floors, of the fetid undersides of cars. She couldn't stand the feel of dirt; if her hands were the least bit grubby she had to go and wash; a rim of grime under her nails could make her shudder. She said, 'I don't know how you can, all that muck.'

He fished for another chocolate. 'Nothing wrong with a bit of dirt. What you going to do, then?'

'Secretarial.'

Men didn't mind so much. At home, her dad did things like unblocking the sink and cleaning the stove; Mum was the same as her, just the feel of grease and stuff made her squirm. They couldn't either of them wear anything that had a stain or a spot.

He said, 'I don't go much on her.'

'Who?'

He waved towards the cottage.

'She's all right. What's wrong with her, then?'

He shrugged. 'I dunno. The way she talks and that.'

‘She lost her husband,’ said the girl. ‘In the war.’ She considered him, across the fence, over a chasm. Mum said boys matured later, in many ways.

‘There’s lots of people done that.’

She looked beyond him, into distances. ‘Tragic, actually. Well, I’ll go back and get on. She says can you see to her bins when you’ve got the sticks. She wants them carried down for the dustmen.’

Mrs Rutter watched her come in, glinting from the cushions. ‘That’s a good girl. Put the tin back in the cupboard, dear.’

‘What would you like me to do now?’

‘There’s my little bit of washing by the sink. Just the personal things to rinse through. That would be ever so kind.’

The girl ran water into the basin. She measured in the soap flakes. She squeezed the pastel nylons, the floating sinuous tights. ‘It’s a lovely colour, that turquoise.’

‘My niece got me that last Christmas. Nightie and a little jacket to go. I was telling you about my wedding dress. The material came from Macy’s, eight yards. I cut it on the cross, for the hang. Of course, I had a figure then.’ She heaved herself round in the chair. ‘You’re a lovely shape, Sandra. You take care you stay that way.’

‘I can get a spare tyre,’ the girl said. ‘If I’m not careful.’

Outside, the bin lids rattled.

‘I hope he’s minding my edging. I’ve got lobelia planted out along that path.’

‘I love blue flowers.’

‘You should see the wood in the spring, with the bluebells. There’s a place right far in where you get lots coming up still. I used to go in there picking every year before my leg started playing me up. Jugs and jugs of them, for the scent. Haven’t you ever seen them?’

The girl shook her head. She wrung out the clothes, gathered up the damp skein. ‘I’ll put these on the line, shall I?’

When she returned the boy was bringing in the filled coal-scuttle and a bundle of sticks.

‘That’s it,’ said Mrs Rutter. ‘Under the sink, that’s where they go. You’ll want to have a wash after that, won’t you? Put the kettle on, Sandra, and we’ll top up the pot.’

The boy ran his hands under the tap. His shirt clung to his shoulder-blades, damp with sweat. He looked over the bottles of detergent, the jug of parsley, the handful of flowers tucked into a coronation mug. He said, ‘Is that the wood where there was that German plane came down in the war?’

‘Don’t start on that,’ said the girl. ‘It always gives me the willies.’

‘What for?’

‘Scary.’

The old woman reached forward and prodded the fire. ‘Put a bit of coal on for me, there’s a good boy. What’s to be scared of? It’s over and done with, good riddance to bad rubbish.’

‘It was there, then?’

‘Shut up,’ said the girl.

‘Were you here?’

‘Fill my cup up, dear, would you. I was here. Me and my sister. My sister Dot. She’s dead now, two years. Heart. That was before she was married of course, nineteen forty-two, it was.’

‘Did you see it come down?’

She chuckled. ‘I saw it come down all right.’

‘What was it?’ said the boy. ‘Messerschmitt?’

‘How would I know that, dear? I don’t know anything about aeroplanes. Anyway, it was all smashed up by the time I saw it, you couldn’t have told t’other from which.’

The girl’s hand hovered, the tea-cup halfway to her mouth. She sipped, put it down. ‘You saw it? Ooh, I wouldn’t have gone anywhere near.’

‘It would have been burning,’ said the boy. ‘It’d have gone up in flames.’

‘There weren’t any flames; it was just stuck there in the ground, end up, with mess everywhere. Drop more milk, dear, if you don’t mind.’

The girl shuddered. ‘I s’pose they’d taken the bodies away by then.’

Mrs Rutter picked out a tea-leaf with the tip of the spoon. She drank, patted the corner of her mouth delicately with a tissue. ‘No, no, ’course not. There was no one else seen it come down. We’d heard the engine and you could tell there was trouble, the noise wasn’t right, and we looked out and saw it come down smack in the trees. ’Course we hadn’t the telephone so there was no ringing the police or the Warden at Clapton. Dot said we should maybe bike to the village but it was a filthy wet night, pouring cats and dogs, and fog too, and we didn’t know if it was one of ours or one of theirs, did we? So Dot said better go and have a look first.’

‘But either way …’ the boy began.

‘We got our wellies on, and Dot had the big lantern, and we went off. It wasn’t very far in. We found it quite quick and Dot grabbed hold of me and pointed and we saw one of the wings sticking up with the markings on and we knew it was one of theirs. We cheered, I can tell you.’

The boy stared at her over the rim of the cup, blank-faced.

‘Dot said bang goes some more of the bastards, come on let’s get back into the warm and we just started back when we heard this noise.’

‘Noise?’

‘Sort of moaning.’

‘Oh,’ cried the girl. ‘How awful, weren’t they …’

‘So we got up closer and Dot held the lantern so we could see and there was three of them, two in the front and they were dead, you could see that all right, one of them had his …’

The girl grimaced. ‘Don’t.’

Mrs Rutter’s chins shook, the pink and creamy chins. ‘Good job you weren’t there, then, my duck. Not that we were laughing at the time, I can tell you, rain teeming down and a raw November night, and that sight under our noses. It wasn’t pretty but I’ve never been squeamish, nor Dot neither. And then we saw the other one.’

‘The other one?’ said the boy warily.

‘The one at the back. He was trapped, see, the way the plane had broken up. There wasn’t any way he could get out.’

The girl stiffened. 'Oh, lor, you mean he …'

'He was hurt pretty bad. He was kind of talking to himself. Something about mutter, mutter … Dot said he's not going to last long, and a good job too, three of them that'll be. She'd been a VAD so she

knew a bit about casualties, see.' Mrs Rutter licked her lips; she looked across at them, her eyes darting. 'Then we went back to the cottage.'

There was silence. The fire gave a heave and a sigh. 'You what?' said the boy.

'Went back inside. It was bucketing down, cats and dogs.'

The boy and girl sat quite still, on the far side of the table.

'That was eighteen months or so after my hubby didn't come back from Belgium.' Her eyes were on the girl; the girl looked away. 'Tit for tat, I said to Dot.'

After a moment she went on. 'Next morning it was still raining and blow me if the bike hadn't got a puncture. I said to Dot, I'm not walking to the village in this, and that's flat, and Dot was running a bit of a temp, she had the 'flu or something coming on. I tucked her up warm and when I'd done the chores I went back in the wood, to have another look. He must have been a tough so-and-so, that Jerry, he was still mumbling away. It gave me a turn, I can tell you. I'd never imagined he'd last the night. I could see him better, in the day-time; he was bashed up pretty nasty. I'd thought he was an old bloke, too, but he wasn't. He'd have been twentyish, that sort of age.'

The boy's spoon clattered to the floor; he did not move.

'I reckon he may have seen me, not that he was in a state to take much in. He called out something. I thought, oh no, you had this coming to you, mate, there's a war on. You won't know that expression – it was what everybody said in those days. I thought, why should I do anything for you? Nobody did anything for my Bill, did they? I was a widow at thirty-nine. I've been on my own ever since.'

The boy shoved his chair back from the table.

'He must have been a tough bastard, like I said. He was still there that evening, but the next morning he was dead. The weather'd perked up by then and I walked to the village and got a message to the people at Clapton. They were ever so surprised; they didn't know there'd been a Jerry plane come down in the area at all. There were lots of people came to take bits for souvenirs, I had a bit myself but it's got mislaid, you tend to mislay things when you get to my age.'

The boy had got up. He glanced down at the girl. 'I'm going,' he said. 'Dunno about you, but I'm going.'

She stared at the lacy cloth on the table, the fluted china cup. 'I'll come too.'

'Eh?' said the old woman. 'You're off, are you? That was nice of you to see to my little jobs for me. Tell what's-'er-name to send someone next week if she can, I like having someone young about the place, once in a while, I've got a sympathy with young people. Here – you're forgetting your pretty jacket, Sandra, what's the hurry? 'Bye then, my ducks, see you close my gate, won't you?'

The boy walked ahead, fast; the girl pattered behind him, sliding on the dry grass. At the gateway into the cornfield he stopped. He said, not looking at her, looking towards the furzy edge of the wood. 'Christ!'

The wood sat there in the afternoon sun. Wind stirred the trees. Birds sang. There were not, the girl realised, wolves or witches or tigers. Nor were there prowling blokes, gypsy-type blokes. And there were not chattering ghostly voices. Somewhere there were some scraps of metal overlooked by people hunting for souvenirs.

The boy said, 'I'm not going near that old bitch again.' He leaned against the gate, clenching his fists on an iron rung; he shook slightly. 'I won't ever forget him, that poor sod.'

She nodded.

‘Two bloody nights. Christ!’

And she would hear, she thought, always, for a long time anyway, that voice trickling on, that soft old woman’s voice; would see a tin painted with cornflowers, pretty china ornaments.

‘It makes you want to throw up,’ he said. ‘Someone like that.’

She couldn’t think of anything to say. He had grown; he had got older and larger. His anger eclipsed his acne, the patches of grease on his jeans, his lardy midriff. You could get people all wrong, she realised with alarm. You could get people wrong and there was a darkness that was not the darkness of tree shadows and murky undergrowth and you could not draw the curtains and keep it out because it was in your head, once known, in your head for ever like lines from a song. One moment you were walking in long grass with the sun on your hair and birds singing and the next you glimpsed darkness, an inescapable darkness. The darkness was out there and it was a part of you and you would never be without it, ever.

She walked behind him, through a world grown unreliable, in which flowers sparkle and birds sing but everything is not as it appears, oh no.

The themes of this story

This is a story in which ideas are very important - probably more so than characters. The most obvious theme is the contrast between appearance and reality, how things seem and how things are. This general contrast is found in many more specific contrasts. Find and write at least two quotes that show each specific contrast.

Darkness and light

This is important enough to the author for her to refer to it in the title of the story. And it is both literal darkness and light (the sunshine in which Sandra walks, the darkness of the wood) and a metaphorical contrast between evil and good.

Quote 1: _____

Quote 2: _____

First impressions

Sandra does not think well of Kerry at first, but she comes to see that he is a strong character. Mrs. Rutter appears at first as a stereotype of a sweet little old lady, but is revealed as a cold-blooded, selfish and vengeful woman.

Quote 1: _____

Quote 2: _____

Good neighbours

Sandra and Kerry (and Miss Hammond) try to be good neighbours. They contrast clearly with Mrs. Rutter who sees the world as divided into friend and foe. This can be amplified into a contrast of values - Kerry sees at once what Mrs. Rutter should have done. She does not even understand his moral sense. She thinks more about the inconvenience of the rain, than a dying man's mortal agony.

Quote 1: _____

Quote 2: _____

Past, present and future

The story contrasts time, but in two directions - from the starting point of the present day, Sandra imagines the future, in idealized terms, while Mrs. Rutter recalls the past in its horrific reality.

Quote 1: _____

Quote 2: _____

Youth and age

You might think that the story suggests that young people are better than the old. This is a possible reading. An alternative view would be that it challenges the popular ideas of the young as selfish and irresponsible. It shows that morality depends not on your age, but the sort of person you are. (Remember that Mrs. Rutter was not an old woman when she left the German to die in pain.)

Quote 1: _____

Quote 2: _____

Question: The story is told from Sandra's viewpoint. But it is written in the third person. This means the narrative uses personal pronouns and possessive forms like "he, she, him, her, his, her"

We do, however, see other viewpoints as people speak - notably those of Mrs. Rutter and of Kerry. So it is possible for the reader to compare them.

As you read the story do you see things from one viewpoint or does your viewpoint change?

Does the author manage to show convincingly the viewpoint of characters younger than herself?

Task: The story is full of word pictures.

Some of these are similes (which make a direct or explicit comparison):

- "a speck like a pin-head"
- "her eyes investigated, quick as mice"
- "like lines from a song"

Explain the effect of these similes, and any others you can find.

Task: A good story has a beginning, a middle and an end, supposedly. Does this story follow the classic pattern? Look at this plan:

- Beginning: we find out why Sandra and Kerry are visiting Nether Cottage
- Middle, 1: Sandra talks to Mrs. Rutter while Kerry works outside
- Middle, 2: Mrs. Rutter tells her story
- Middle, 3: Kerry passes judgement on Mrs. Rutter
- End: Sandra sees the truth about darkness or evil in the world

Is this a good model of the structure of the story, or would you show it in some other way?

Make your own diagram to show the structure of the story.

Read the following statements. Put a tick next to those you agree with, a cross next to those you disagree with and a question mark next to those you're not sure about.	✓ x ?
In the story, 'The Darkness Out There', Kerry is the hero.	
In 'The Darkness Out There', Kerry is the conscience of the story.	
Kerry provides Sandra with a 'true' perspective. Despite his slobbish appearance and behaviour, he shows that he has strong values. Both he and Mrs Rutter prompt Sandra to re-evaluate the world she lives in.	
Kerry is the opposite of Mrs Rutter. It could be said that he represents 'light' (truth and integrity) whereas she represents 'darkness' (narrow-mindedness and cruelty).	

Writing Task: Perhaps Kerry or Sandra keeps a diary. Write a series of entries for diaries kept by one or both of these characters. These should be for dates before and after the Good Neighbours Club visit to Mrs. Rutter. (It could be that this event will cause the diarist to give up writing for some time or for good!)

In doing this, you can adapt your style to the way you think these young people would write. How do we know this? We don't exactly, but there are big clues in Sandra's and Kerry's speech, in Sandra's thoughts, and even in their knowledge and ideas of the future (Kerry knows car and aeroplane types, while Sandra seems not to know names of foreign countries).

When the Wasps Drowned

by Claire Wigfall

That was the summer Therese stepped on the wasps' nest and brought an end to our barefoot wanderings, when the sun shone every day and everybody commented upon it. Old ladies on park benches, fanning themselves with well-thumbed issues of Woman's Own, would sigh, 'Oh, isn't it hot?' And I, hungry for conversation, would sit tall on the wooden seat and smile as I agreed, eyes darting to see if they might say anything more. The heat was all anyone ever seemed to speak of, and I knew that when the weather changed we'd still be talking of the same thing, only then we'd be blowing at our hands and complaining of the cold.

The chemist sold out of after-sun that summer, and flower beds dried up, and people had to queue to get into the swimming pool. With towels hung over their arms or squashed into carrier bags, we'd see them waiting along the wall outside, listening to the shouts echoing on the water within, envious of those who emerged coolly with hair slicked damp and eyes pinkened by chlorine, carrying bags of crisps from the vending machine.

It was the first time the garden walls seemed confining, when finally I was tall enough to peer over their mossy tops and look across the line of gardens and see sheets, dried out in the heat, listless in the still air, and hear the tinny music of distant transistor radios, and the ache of cars moving slowly in the hot sun, their windows wide as if that might change anything.

That was the summer they dug up Mr Mordecai's garden

We heard her screams from inside. I was standing at the sink, barefoot on the lino, washing up the breakfast dishes, soaping them lazily as I watched the light play on the bubbles. Tyler was curled under the kitchen table pushing a toy truck back and forth, smiling at the rattle of its metal wheels. Her screaming, the way it broke the day, so shocked me that I dropped a glass, which smashed on the tap and fell into the dishwater below. She was running in circles round the garden, shrieking, a halo of angry wasps blurring her shape, her pigtails dancing.

For the first few moments I just stood, mouth agape, watching her through the grime of the kitchen window not wanting to go anywhere near Therese or all those wasps. As I ran to the back door, Tyler rose and toddled after me. I remember him laughing as I turned the hose on her – he thought it all a joke. Dripping with water, her sundress clinging to a polka-dot of red welts, Therese continued to scream into the afternoon. Around her on the grass, wasps lay dark on their backs, legs kicking, wings too sodden to fly.

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Mum was out at work all day. She left us to our own devices. Sometimes I'd take them out, Therese picking at her scabs, Tyler strapped in the buggy. We'd walk down to the park and I'd sit by the swings and watch the boys. They'd stand in a huddle by the public loos, puffing on cigarettes.

Other days we'd just lie in the garden and absorb the heat. I'd fashioned a bikini from a pair of pink knickers and an old vest which I'd cropped just below my nipples. I had a pair of green plastic sunglasses I'd bought at the corner shop and the yellow flip-flops Mum now insisted we wear. I'd sunbathe while Therese scoured the grass for wasp corpses. When she found one she'd place it on a paving slab and, using a stone, pound its body to dust. Tyler would squat sagely beside her. I'd watch them idly, lift an arm perhaps to point out another dead wasp lodged between blades of grass.

It was maybe early August when she and Tyler started to dig under the garden wall. Sitting in its shadow, they scratched away with sticks, collecting the dry earth in a plastic bucket. 'Help us, Eveline,' they'd say, 'we're digging to Australia,' but I'd just roll my eyes and turn the page of my magazine. The task would occupy them for a while and then they'd come and loll next to me, Tyler flat out on his stomach, snuffling as the grass tickled his nostrils, Therese plaiting together thin strands of my hair.

So we'd lie and wait for Mum to come home, her uniform sweaty round the edges.

Then she'd sit, her legs up on one of the kitchen chairs, complaining how her feet were swollen, watching as we prepared the fish fingers or chicken nuggets.

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In that heat, everything seemed an effort. There was a day I remember; I was lying on my side, eyes closed. Therese, finished her digging, was flopped next to me. One plump arm was curled in a damp embrace around my knee. She was breathing hotly against my hip. I opened my eyes in a slow squint against the sun. Therese's other arm was flung out above her head.

It was the glint that caught my eye. I only saw it as she jerked her hand at the buzz of a fly. Wedged on her thumb was a thin gold ring, studded with small diamonds. There was dirt lodged between the stones, but still they caught the sunlight and glimmered. At first I didn't react. I just lay there, watching.

'Therese,' I said finally, 'where'd you get that ring?'

'Found it,' she sighed.

I heaved myself up by one elbow and took her hand in mine to look more closely at the small piece of jewellery. 'Where?' I asked. Therese yawned before rolling onto one side and up. She walked me to the hole they'd been digging. It was deep and long now, tunnelling under our wall and into Mr Mordecai's garden. We knelt down and peered into its depths. It was too dark to see much. Therese took my hand and guided it into the hole. Straight away I knew what it was I could feel, but I told Therese to run in and find the torch. She came back a moment later and we angled the light. At the end of the tunnel, a pale hand reached towards us.

We said nothing as we looked. The skin was mauve in places, the fingernails chipped and clogged with soil. Suddenly the day around us seemed unbearably quiet, as if everything was holding its breath.

'Therese,' I said eventually, 'I think we'd better fill up the hole.'

We collected the plastic bucket and shunted the piles of earth back where they came from, patting the ground flat with our hands.

Leaning across to her, I took the ring from Therese's thumb and slipped it onto my right index finger. She didn't protest.

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And so the digging stopped. We ignored the bald patch of earth by the fence, the mark of the aborted Australia project. The ring I cleaned with an old toothbrush and

wore sometimes, but only ever while Mum was at work.

The long days continued to melt into one another. Mum would put us to bed and it would still be light outside. Beyond the curtained windows the world continued and we could hear it all, even clearer than winter nights when it was dark. Tyler and Therese were too hot and tired to feel they might be missing anything but I would lie awake under the sheets, listening to the street and the muffle of Mum's radio downstairs.

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One night Therese woke crying from a bad dream. She padded through to Mum's room and I could hear them across the landing, Mum's voice comforting and sleepy, Therese's diluted by her tears, 'and I was watering the garden, Mum, with a blue watering can, and it started to grow ...'

'Sleep now, my love, shhh.' I wanted Mum's gentle shush in my own ear. When I closed my eyes I could see Therese's dream, the arm growing up through the soil.

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The holidays began finally to peter to a close. The days were still stifled by the heat and, at a loss as to how we might fill them, we'd even begun to miss going to school. Very occasionally, Mum would leave sweet money. Then we'd buy Smarties, lick the shells of the red ones, and rub swathes of scarlet food colouring across our lips. That's what we were doing when we heard the doorbell ring. I flip-flopped through the cool of the house to open the front door. A man and a woman stood on the step.

'Is Mum or Dad in, love?' As she asked the question, he peered over our shoulders into the hallway.

I blinked up at them through my sunglasses. Therese and Tyler were both clinging to my bare legs, Tyler fingering the elastic of my bikini bottom. Pouting Smartie-red lips, I told them Mum was at work, wouldn't be home until six. I held my right hand behind my back.

The woman bent towards us and smiled. I tried to stand taller. 'Maybe you can help us then. We're from the police; we just want to ask a couple of questions.' She held out a photograph of a late-teenage girl. A holiday pic. The girl was sun-browned, smiling at something beyond the camera lens. 'Do you think you might have seen this girl?'

We all looked, then shook our heads.

'Are you sure?' She held the photo closer. 'You wouldn't have seen her on the street or anything?'

We all shook our heads again. The man loosened his collar, wiped a trickle of perspiration from his forehead. He caught my glance and smiled. I didn't smile back.

'Well, that's all then,' said the woman, lowering the picture to her side. 'You've been very helpful, thank you.' She stretched out a hand to ruffle Tyler's curls. He pressed closer against my leg.

I shut the door and we waited a while, heard them walking down our garden path and unlatching Mr Mordecai's gate next door. My fingers, fiddling unconsciously, played with the ring for a moment as we stood together in the dark hallway. None of us said a thing. Taking Therese and Tyler by the hand, I turned, and we stepped back out into the sunlight of the garden.

Sort the words into the categories below

Domestic	Danger	Sounds/noises	Summer/heat	Outdoors

ache after-sun air angry barefoot beds benches blowing blurring breakfast bubbles cars change changed chlorine cold commented complaining confining conversation curled dancing darting day dishes dishwater dried dropped dug enough every everybody eyes fanning flower garden glass halo hands hear heat hot hungry kitchen ladies lazily light lino listless metal mossy music nest old park peer pigtails play radios rattle round running screams seat see shape sheets shone shrieking sigh sink sit smashed smile smiling slowly soaping speak standing stepped still summer sun swimming table talking tall tap tinny toy transistor truck walls wanderings washing wasps water weather wheels wide windows wooden

Questions:

• Why do you think Claire Wigfall chose the title "When the Wasps Drowned"? Is it a good title? Could there be a better one?

• Why does Eveline's narrative focus so little on the horror of finding a body?

- How would you describe Eveline (the narrator) in 'When the Wasps Drowned'?
- At the end of the story, 'When the Wasps Drowned', how do you feel about Eveline, the narrator?
- Do you think the wasps are a positive or negative presence in the story?
- Do you think the wasps' nest itself has any significance? If so, what? (Have you heard of the phrase 'to stir up a hornets' nest'? If not, have a guess at what it might mean. How might this phrase apply to the story?)

Danger – the wasps injure Therese. However, they're not the real threat to the children. Mr Mordecai is. The wasps help to remind us of this.

When the wasps are killed, their carcasses lie on the lawn. They could be said to symbolise death.

Wasps are seen as being aggressive and predatory – like Mr Mordecai.

Wasps

The wasps are a threatening presence and help determine the tone of the story.

Today you are a SYMBOLISM DETECTIVE!

Look at the pictures and think about the various connotations (what is implied beyond the obvious meaning). What might each one symbolise in the story? You'll need to feed back your CSI findings to the rest of the class – so make sure you have prepared evidence!

Symbolism in *When The Wasps Drowned*

Choose from the statements below

In 'When the Wasps Drowned', the **wasps** themselves might symbolise:

a) pain and danger
b) sadness (because they have drowned)
c) something else altogether, such as…

In 'When the Wasps Drowned', the **body** might symbolise:

a) menace and threat
b) the end of innocence and childhood
c) something else altogether, such as …

In 'When the Wasps Drowned', the **garden** might symbolise:

a) change – a safe, secure place becomes filled with danger
b) hidden things, secrets
c) something else altogether, such as…

Task:

Re-write the story (or an episode) from a different narrative perspective. Continue with first person narration using a different character.

My Polish Teacher's Tie

by Helen Dunmore

I wear a uniform, blue overall and white cap with the school logo on it. Part-time catering staff, that's me, £3.89 per hour. I dish out tea and buns to the teachers twice a day, and I shovel chips on to the kids' trays at dinner-time. It's not a bad job. I like the kids.

The teachers pay for their tea and buns. It's one of those schemes teachers are good at. So much into a kitty, and that entitles them to cups of tea and buns for the rest of the term. Visitors pay, too, or it wouldn't be fair. Very keen on fairness, we are, here.

It was ten-forty-five when the Head got up to speak. He sees his staff together for ten minutes once a week, and as usual he had a pile of papers in front of him. I never listen to any of it as a rule, but as I was tipping up the teapot to drain I heard him mention Poland.

I am half-Polish. They don't know that here. My name's not Polish or anything. It was my mother, she came here after the war. I spoke Polish till I was six, Baby Polish full of rhymes Mum taught me. Then my father put a stop to it. "You'll get her all mixed up, now she's going to school. What use is Polish ever going to be to her?" I can't speak it now. I've got a tape, a tape of me speaking Polish with Mum. I listen, and I think I'm going to understand what we're saying, and then I don't.

`... long-term aim is to arrange a teacher exchange - several Polish teachers are looking for penfriends in English schools, to improve their written English ... so if you're interested, the information's all here ...'

He smiled, wagging the papers, and raised his eyebrows. I wrung out a cloth and wiped my surfaces. I was thinking fast. Thirteen minutes before I was due downstairs.

The meeting broke up and the Head vanished in a knot of teachers wanting to talk to him. I lifted the counter-flap, tucked my hair under the cap, and walked across. Teachers are used to getting out of the way of catering staff without really seeing them.

`Excuse me,' I said, pushing forward, `excuse me,' and they did. Then I was in front of the Head. `Excuse me,' I said again, and he broke off what he was saying. I saw him thinking, trouble . The kids chucking chips again. He stitched a nice smile on his face and said, `Oh, er - Mrs, er - Carter. Is there a problem?'

`No,' I said, `I was just wondering, could I have that address?'

`Address?'

`The Polish one. You said there was a Polish teacher who wanted an English penfriend.'

`Oh. Ah, yes. Of course.' He paused, looking at me as if it might be a trick question. `Is it for yourself?'

`I'd like to write to a Polish teacher.'

`Oh,' he said. `Yes. Of course, Mrs Carter.'

I took the address and smiled at him.

When Steve's first letter came I saw he'd taken it for granted I was a teacher. The person he had in his head when he was writing to me was an English teacher, a real professional. This person earned more money than him and had travelled and seen places and done things he'd never been able to do. He was really called Stefan, but he said he was going to call himself Steve when he wrote to me.

Jade saw the letter. `What's that, Mum?'

`Just a letter. You can have the stamp if you want.'

In the second letter Steve told me that he wrote poetry.

`I have started a small literary magazine in our department. If you want, I am happy to send you some of our work.'

I told him about Jade. I told him about the songs my mother taught me in Polish, the ones I used to know but I'd forgotten. I didn't write anything about my job. Let him think what he wanted to think. I wasn't lying.

The first poem he sent me was about a bird in a coal mine. He sent me the English translation. This bird flew down the main shaft and got lost in the tunnels underground, then it sang and sang until it died. Everyone heard it singing, but no one could find it. I liked that poem. It made me think maybe I'd been missing something, because I hadn't read any poetry since I left school. I wrote back, `Send me the Polish, just so I can see it.' When the Polish came I tried it over in my head. It sounded a bit like the rhymes my mother used to sing.

At first we wrote every week, then it was twice. I used to write a bit every day then make myself wait until the middle of the week to send it. I wrote after Jade was in bed. Things would suddenly come to me. I'd write, `Oh, Steve, I've just remembered ...' , or `... Do you see what I mean, Steve, or does it sound funny?' It made it seem more like talking to him when I used his name.

He wrote me another poem. It was about being half-Polish and half-English, and the things I'd told him about speaking Polish until I was six and then forgetting it all:

`Mother, I've lost the words you gav e me. Call the police, tell them there's a reward ... I'll do anything ...'

He was going to put it in the literary magazine, `if you have no objection, Carla' . That was the way he wrote, always very polite. I said it was fine by me.

One day the Head stopped me and said, `Did you ever write to that chap? The Polish teacher?'

`Yes,' I said. Nothing more. Let him think I'd written once then not bothered. Luckily, Mrs Callendar came up to talk about OFSTED.

`Ah, yes, OFSTED. Speaking of visitors,' said the Head, raising his voice the way he does so that one minute he's talking to you and the next it's a public announcement, `I have news of progress on the Polish teachers' exchange. A teacher will be coming over from Katowice next month. His name is Stefan Jeziorny, and he will be staying with Mrs Kenward. We're most grateful to you for your hospitality, Valerie.'

Mrs Kenward flushed. The Head beamed at nobody. Stefan Jeziomy, I thought. I had clicked, even though I was so used to thinking of him as Steve. Why hadn't he said he was coming?

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I dropped Jade off to tea with her friend. There was a letter waiting when I got home. I tore it open and read it with my coat still on. There was a bit about my last letter, and poetry, and then the news.

`You will know from your school, Carla, that I will come to England. I am hoping to make many contacts for the future, for other teachers who will also come to English schools. I hope, Carla, that you will introduce me to your colleagues. I will stay with an English Family who offer accommodation.'

I felt terrible. He sounded different, not like Steve. Not just polite any more, but all stiff, and a bit hurt. He must have thought I'd known about his visit from the other teachers, and I hadn't wanted to invite him to stay with me. But what was worse was that he was going to expect to meet me. Or not me, exactly, but the person he'd been writing to, who didn't really exist. `I have been corresponding with a colleague of yours, Carla Carter,' he'd say to the other teachers. Then he'd wait for someone to say, `Yes, of course, Carla's here, she's expecting you.'

Colleagues don't wear blue overalls and white caps and work for £3.89 an hour. Somebody'd remember me asking the Head for his address, and there'd be a

whisper running all round, followed by a horrible silence. They'd all look round at the serving-hatch and there I'd be, the big teapot in my hand and a plate of buns in front of me. And Steve'd look too. He'd still be smiling, because that's what you do in a foreign place when you don't know what's going on.

He'd think I was trying to make a fool of him, making him believe I was a teacher. Me, Carla Carter, part-time catering assistant, writing to him about poetry.

I could be off sick. I could swap with Jeannie. She could do the teachers' breaks. Or I could say Jade was ill.

No. That wouldn't work. Steve had my name, and my address. I sat down and spread out his letter again, then I went to the drawer and got all his other letters. I'd never had letters like that before and I was never going to again, not after Steve knew who I really was.

I didn't write, and Steve didn't write again either. I couldn't decide if it was because he was hurt, or because he knew he'd be seeing me soon anyway. The fuss Valerie Kenward

made about having him to stay, you'd think the Pope was coming for a fortnight. I never liked her. Always holding up the queue saying she's on a diet, and then taking the biggest bun.

`If you're that bothered,' I said, `he can come and stay in my flat, with me and Jade.' But I said it to myself, in my head. I knew he'd want to be with the other teachers.

I couldn't stop looking for letters. And then there was the poetry book I'd bought. It seemed a shame to bin it. It might come in for Jade, I thought.

A week went by, eight days, ten. Each morning I woke up and I knew something was wrong before I could remember what it was. It got worse every day until I thought, Sod it, I'm not going to worry any more .

The next morning-break the buns were stale. Valerie Kenward poked them, one after another. `We ought to get our money back,' she said. But she still took one, and waited while I filled the teapot from the urn.

`How's it going?' Susie Douglas asked her.

`Hard work!' stage-whispered Valerie, rolling her eyes.

`He's not got much conversation, then?'

`Are you joking? All he wants to talk about is poetry. It's hell for the kids, he doesn't mean to be funny but they can't keep a straight face. It's the way he talks. Philippa had to leave the room at supper-time, and I can't say I blame her.'

You wouldn't, I thought. If ever anyone brought up their kids to be pleased with themselves, it's Valerie Kenward.

`And even when it's quite a well-known writer like Shakespeare or Shelley, you can't make out what he's on about. It's the accent.'

`He is Polish. I mean, how many Polish poets could you pronounce?' asked Susie.

`And his ties !' went on Valerie. `You've never seen anything like them.'

I looked past both of them. I'd have noticed him before, if I hadn't been so busy. He was sitting stiffly upright, smiling in the way people smile when they don't quite understand what's going on. The Head was wagging a sheaf of papers in front of him, and talking very loudly, as if he was deaf. Steve. Stefan Jeziorny. He was wearing a brown suit with padded shoulders. It looked too big for him. His tie was wider than normal ties, and it was red with bold green squiggles on it. It was a terribly hopeful tie. His shoes had a fantastic shine on them. His face looked much too open, much too alive, as if a child Jade's age had got into an adult's body.

`Isn't that tea made yet ?' asked Valerie.

I looked at her. `No,' I said. `It's not. Excuse me,' and I lifted the counter-flap and ducked past her while her mouth was still open. I walked up to where Steve was sitting. He looked

round at me the way a child does when he doesn't know anyone at a party, hoping for rescue.

`Hello,' I said. He jumped up, held out his hand. `How do you do?' he asked, as if he really wanted to know. I took his hand. It was sweaty, as I'd known it would be. He was tense as a guitar string.

`I'm Carla,' I said.

`Carla?' He couldn't hide anything. I saw it all swim in his eyes. Surprise. Uncertainty. What was he going to do? And then I saw it. Pleasure. A smile lit in his eyes and ran to his mouth.

`Carla! You are Carla Carter. My penfriend.'

`Yes.'

Then he did something I still can't quite believe. He stood there holding on to my hand right in the middle of the staffroom, his big bright tie blazing, and he sang a song I knew. It went through me like a knife through butter. A Polish song. I knew it, I knew it. I knew the words and the tune. It was one of the songs my mother used to sing to me. I felt my lips move. There were words in my mouth, words I didn't understand. And then I was singing, stumbling after him all the way to the end of the verse.

`Good heavens. How very remarkable. I didn't realize you were Polish, Mrs ... er ...' said the Head as he bumbled round us flapping his papers.

`Nor did I,' I said. But I wasn't going to waste time on the Head. I wanted to talk about poetry. I smiled at Steve. His red tie with its bold green squiggles was much too wide and much too bright. It was a flag from another country, a better country than the ones either of us lived in. `I like your tie,' I said.

<u>Tasks:</u>

With a highlighter go through the text and look for quotes on the following:

- ❑ IDENTITY
- ❑ STATUS

In what ways could the <u>tie</u> and the <u>letters</u> be seen as metaphors?

How would you describe Carla Carter in 'My Polish Teacher's Tie'?

What does Carla Carter learn during the course of the story in 'My Polish Teacher's Tie'?

Can personal identity change? How?

What do you think is the most important aspect of Carla's identity?

Does this change at any point in the story?

Who initiates these changes? Is this important?

How would you describe the relationship between Carla and her Polish heritage? Find three quotations that demonstrate this.