

AMELIA

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SIOBHÁN PARKINSON

Teaching Guide

By Gillian Perdue

RATIONALE AND THEMES This is an enthralling historical novel, set at the turn of the century amid rumours of approaching war and rebellion. It is suitable for the senior cycle in primary schools and junior cycle in secondary schools because of its subject matter and its treatment of important themes, such as:

- A young girl's coming of age
- Developing responsibility
- Friendship and fairweather friends
- Structure of society and development of a social conscience
- Parental fallibility
- The growth of feminism
- Sibling relationships

SUMMARY

The story begins with 12-year-old Amelia Pim absorbed in planning her birthday party. She has a doting father, a loving, though distracted, mother and an irritating younger brother, Edmund. The family are Quakers and live in modest luxury in Kenilworth Square in Dublin. Amelia's mother is a suffragette and attends rallies and demonstrations demanding votes for women, much to Amelia's disdain. Though the Pims have servants, it is a family rule not to make life difficult for them and, as Quakers, they have a strong social conscience and involve themselves in charitable works. A new servant, Mary Ann, has just commenced working for the Pims. She is close to Amelia in age, but worlds apart in terms of maturity and responsibility. She is a nationalist and has a brother in prison. She and Amelia become friends. The story

gathers pace rapidly as the family fortune is lost and the house has to be sold. Mama is arrested and imprisoned for her part in a demonstration. Edmund becomes ill with pneumonia. Amelia transforms before our eyes into the lynch-pin of the family. She nurses Edmund, comforts her father and examines the world through new eyes. She confronts her own prejudices about poverty and equality. The young woman she becomes is far removed from the cosseted girl we met at the beginning of the story.

APPROACH For the purposes of this exploration, the novel has been divided into five main sections, covering four or five chapters at a time. The pace at which the novel is read is entirely up to the teacher. It may suit to read one chapter per day or in larger blocks. Discussion points and activities are listed at the end of each section.

UNIT 1 PREPARING FOR A PARTY

SUMMARY

We meet the Pim family: Amelia, who is dying to be a Young Lady; Mama, dynamic and distracted, socialist, feminist and champion of the poor; Papa, handsome and noble and king of his business empire; and Edmund, already delicate and focus of Mama's greatest tenderness and concern. There is also Grandmama, dressed in

the old Quaker fashion, a formidable lady and link with the past. We learn how society was structured at the turn of the century, with people knowing their 'place' and children being seen and not heard. Amelia is to have a real party for her birthday. She first dreams of and is then given the most perfect dress of emerald green silk. She befriends Mary Ann, the new servant, and learns of patriotism and the Irish Republican Brotherhood.

Read pp.11–55.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Amelia used the orangery as her special hideout. Why would she need to get away and think quietly? Do you ever feel a similar need?
- Why do you think Amelia's Mama was a 'great disappointment to her in many ways'?

ACTIVITIES

1. WRITE AN ACCOUNT

Papa has surprised the family by buying a motor car. On p.23, he mentions some other forms of transport. Make a list of the various forms of transport used at the turn of the century. Write an account of the invention of the motor car.

2. WRITE A REPLY

Mary Ann observes that 'other people's religion could be a touchy subject'. Do you agree with this statement? Write a reply, giving reasons for your answer.

3. METAPHORS

A metaphor compares two things, without using the word 'like' or explaining the

comparison. On p.21, the author describes Amelia taking the plan 'out of the drawer she had put it in at the back of her mind' and shaking it out, unfolding it carefully. To what is she comparing the plan? To what is she comparing Amelia's mind?

List some common metaphors you have read, eg. 'He has a heart of gold'.

4. EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Mama wants equality for women and discusses this with Amelia on p.27. However, Amelia points out that it's not fair that some women are privileged, while others are not. Find out all you can about the way society was structured at this time. You will find that people were not considered equal. How does it compare to today's society?

Draw a diagram showing the class structure (gentry at the top; poor on the bottom).

5. RESEARCH

Look up the countries that exported tea and spices to Amelia's Papa (p.22). Can you find Ceylon and Siam?

6. MORE RESEARCH

The Pims were Quakers or, more correctly, members of The Religious Society of Friends. This Christian organisation was founded by George Fox in England more than 300 years ago. The Friends were among the first to establish free schools for the poor, to advocate prison reform, to care for the mentally ill, and to oppose slavery. Find out more about the Quaker community in your own area.

7. FIELD TRIP

Amelia's house in Kenilworth Square, Dublin, would have been very elegant, several storeys high, with stone steps to the front door and large, high-ceilinged rooms.

Dublin is famous for its beautiful Georgian houses, built between 1720 and 1830, eg. 29 Fitzwilliam Street Lower, which has been restored to true Georgian elegance. Visiting information can be found at <http://www.esb.ie/numbertwenty-nine>. You may instead choose to research a Georgian-period building in your area.

UNIT 2 THE PARTY

SUMMARY

Plans for the party continue. Mama and Amelia go to Findlater's shop and choose a huge array of food. When Mama gives the family name, however, they must leave the shop empty-handed as the shop boy tells her there's a problem with the account. The orangery is repaired, cleaned and transformed. The birthday arrives and Amelia receives presents from everyone, including a gold watch from her father. She is the heroine of the day at school; though, perhaps as an omen of things to come, she loses the beautiful watch. She wears her princess dress of silk and the party begins. Papa comes home distraught. There will be no rides in the new car. It is gone, in fact everything is lost. He is ruined.

Read pp.56–85.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Discuss the scene on pp.57–58 where Mama is told that she may not have the goods on account. Can you describe the emotions that she must have felt? Did she cope well with the situation?
- Have you ever been embarrassed by your parents' behaviour? Do you think Amelia disapproves of Mama (see p.61)?
- Why do you think Mama was surprised to see the gold watch? What do you think this exchange between her parents reminded Amelia of?
- Pacifism is also mentioned (p.50). Remember that Ireland was on the brink of rebellion and Europe was on the brink of the First World War. Would you have been a pacifist or an advocate of 'just war' in these circumstances? Discuss.

ACTIVITIES

1. DEFINITIONS

In Unit 1, we read about Nationalism (p.50), Communism (p.52) and Socialism (p.50). Write a definition for each term. How would these belief systems conflict with the lifestyle of the Pim household?

Identify the good and bad parts of each.

2. IT'S THE THOUGHT THAT COUNTS

The present you give says much about you. List the four presents Amelia received for her birthday and from whom she received them. Then write some sentences to explain why each person gave her that present.

3. MANNERISMS

A mannerism is a habit or way of doing something that is special to that person. On p.58, Mick Moriarty put his cap further back than normal as a sign that he was thinking hard.

Make a list of some people/friends you know very well. Can you find a mannerism or quirky habit for each one of them?

4. ROLE PLAY

Translate the shop scene on pp.57–58 into modern-day terms at a supermarket.

Write it as a short play between your parent/guardian and a shop assistant, imagining that your parent/guardian's credit card is on the black list and you are standing there with a full trolley and no money to pay for it. Act out in class.

UNIT 3 COMING DOWN IN THE WORLD

SUMMARY

The Pims move to a smaller house where they now have to cook and clean for themselves. The Friends have helped Papa by finding him a job in a Quaker firm. Mary Ann has gone to work as a maid in Glasnevin. Papa is depressed and seeks solace in beer. Mama proves to be a hardworking housekeeper, but a dreadful cook. Amelia begins cooking and discovers a natural talent. Amelia returns to school to find all her friends have rejected her and some even tease and mock her about her family's misfortunes. Meanwhile Edmund becomes weaker and more sickly. Mama still attends rallies and demonstrations and is interested in the women's republican organisation, Cumann na mBan.

However, when she hears that they are going to fight the British, she withdraws her support. Amelia is desperate to see Mary Ann and makes a call to her employer's house after an adventurous afternoon in the GPO. The unit ends with the shocking news that Mama has been arrested and is in prison awaiting trial.

Read pp.89–129.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Why do you think Amelia was 'mortified' because people could see into the interior of the new house?
- Did any of Amelia's friends rally round and offer support?
- Grandmama encouraged the family to consider themselves lucky to have a roof over their heads. Why did Amelia find this difficult? (see p.90)

ACTIVITIES

1. CREATIVE WRITING

On p.92, Amelia is horrified to think of the familiar furniture being taken away by the bailiffs.

Imagine your home was going to be dismantled in a similar way. What five items of furniture could you not bear to part with and why? Write a short account.

2. PROVERBS

A proverb is an old saying, such as: 'There's no point crying over spilt milk' (p.92). What does this mean?

Make a list of 10 well-known proverbs and their meanings. Which is your favourite?

3. HOUSEHOLD CHORES

This unit contains much information about household chores as they would have been performed at the turn of the century. Read pp.96–100 again and make a list of these chores.

Write a paragraph about how household chores are done nowadays. How is a house heated? How are clothes washed, meals prepared? Which way is easier?

4. COMMUNICATIONS

It was not easy to keep in touch with people at that time. List the methods of communication mentioned in this unit. Look up Morse Code and see how it was used long ago. There are many ways to

keep in touch nowadays. List these also.

Write a short paragraph comparing letter-writing with using the telephone. Are there advantages/disadvantages to each?

5. CLASS DEBATE

Organise a class debate on the motion: 'The best way to deal with teasing is to appear not to mind.' (See how Amelia fared with this strategy, p.105).

UNIT 4 CRISIS

SUMMARY

Mama is sentenced to 60 days in prison. Edmund collapses and the doctor diagnoses pneumonia. He is critically ill and Amelia stays home from school to nurse him. Papa is distraught at the thought of losing his son. Amelia realises that, to Papa and many others, boys are more valuable than girls. At last she begins to understand the sense of injustice that led her mother to gaol. While caring for Edmund she decides she would like to be a doctor. Edmund survives and begins the slow path to recovery. Amelia meets Mary Ann who concludes that she has done a lot of growing up. They go to Mary Ann's tenement where her family lives in appalling squalor. Amelia pays the doctor's bill by pawning her silk dress.

Read pp.130–168.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Mama had been imprisoned for taking part in a peaceful demonstration. Do you think a person should be punished for expressing their beliefs or demanding rights? Why do you think so many suffragettes were imprisoned?
- How well is Papa coping with his problems?
- What do you think Amelia's feelings were when she discovered that her father valued Edmund more than his own daughter?
- Read pp.156–159 and discuss the appalling poverty and conditions in which Mary Ann's family lived. Would these conditions be tolerated now? Are there people in our society who live

like this?

ACTIVITIES

1. LETTER WRITING

Write a letter from Mary Ann to Amelia explaining why she 'has no time for friendship at the moment' (p.160).

Try to convey the pain she must have suffered in choosing between visiting her dying mother and feeding her family.

2. INTERVIEW

Imagine you are a reporter sent to interview Roberta Pim in prison.

Write a series of questions and the answers you think she would give. Act out in class.

3. RESEARCH AND WRITE

People used to die from diseases which are treated with antibiotics today. Find out how and when penicillin, the first antibiotic, was discovered.

Write an account of this fantastic discovery and explain how antibiotics work.

UNIT 5 NEW BEGINNINGS

SUMMARY

The day of Mama's return finally dawns. First, though, the family goes to Meeting, and Dorothea Jacob gives Amelia back her gold watch. The house has been spring-cleaned from top to bottom by Amelia and Grandmama. Mama's first words to Amelia are 'I'm sorry.' Amelia returns to school to face unkind comments from Lucinda, but when Dorothea wades in on Amelia's side, the girls cheer and welcome her back. Amelia receives a letter and receipt from Dr Mitchell. He has reconsidered his opinion of women doctors and offers to assist in her training. Mama is proud of Amelia and realises the sacrifice she made in pawning the green dress. The family goes on an outing to the Botanic Gardens where they meet Lucinda's family. There is the promise of new beginnings – Amelia is to join Frederick Goodbody for a day's walking, and Papa has been promoted. The future looks bright.

Read pp.169–199.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Compare the preparations for bath night in Amelia's house with the same event nowadays.
- From what you have learned about the Friends in this novel, do you agree with Papa's statement that they are 'an opinionated people' (p.171). What kind of social issues did they have opinions about?
- On p.172, we read that Amelia felt thankful for Edmund's life, for Mama's homecoming, and for the sunshine. Would she have been thankful for any of these things at the beginning of the story? How and why has her value system changed?

ACTIVITIES

1. VOCABULARY EXTENSION

These words are all used in Unit 5: translucent, perfunctory, querulous, disreputable, intense, pecuniary, incumbent.

Look them up to find their meanings, arrange them in alphabetical order and

write, in your own words, a definition for each.

2. ANALYSIS

Sibling rivalry is a state of jealousy and competitiveness between brothers and sisters. Have Amelia's feelings of sibling rivalry changed since the beginning of the story? How and why have her feelings changed?

Write a paragraph describing any jealousy (sibling or otherwise) you have felt in the past. How was it resolved?

3. WHAT IS A GOOD FRIEND?

Dorothea wasn't pretty or popular but Amelia ultimately chose her for a friend because she stuck up for her in a crowd. Write a piece entitled:

'Ingredients that Make a Good Friend'. Do you know anybody who fits the bill?

4. FIELDWORK

Many towns and cities have memorials to commemorate those who died in World War I. Visit the War Memorial Gardens, Islandbridge, Dublin, or contact the Secretary, War Memorial Building, 9–13

Waring Street, Belfast, to arrange a tour.

5. PLAN A WALKING TOUR

Using a street map of Dublin, plan a tour that would take in these places, mentioned in the story: the GPO, Trinity College, Eustace Street, Dame Street, South Great George's Street, Camden Street. Find the Friends' Meeting House on Eustace Street.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, SIOBHÁN PARKINSON



SIOBHÁN PARKINSON is an Irish author who has written many novels to great critical acclaim. She lives in Dublin with her husband, Roger Bennett, and their son Matthew, her personal teenage proofreader. Appointed as the Dublin Corporation Irish Writers' Centre Writer-in-Residence in 1999, her primary interests are reading and writing.

Other highly successful titles from Siobhán Parkinson include *No Peace for Amelia*; *Sisters ... No Way!*; *The Moon King*; *Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (maybe)* and *The Love Bean*.

AWARDS FOR SIOBHÁN PARKINSON

Sisters ... No Way!

Bisto Book of the Year Award 1997

Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (maybe)

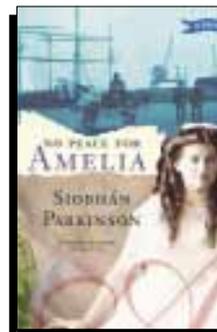
Bisto Merit Award 1998

White Ravens 1998 – International Youth Library Selection

The Moon King

Bisto Merit Award 1999

Another story about Amelia Pim



No Peace for Amelia is the sequel to *Amelia*. Set in Dublin in 1916 and involving World War I, this novel is an exploration of Amelia Pim's confused feelings surrounding the issue of divided loyalties, against the backdrop of

