



WINGS OVER DELFT

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AUBREY FLEGG

Teaching Guide

By Liz Morris

RATIONALE AND THEMES

This book has been chosen for use in the junior cycle of second-level schools, or with fluent and mature readers in the senior cycle of primary schools, because of its sensitive and insightful treatment of important themes, such as:

- truth, absolute and relative
- love and relationships
- boundaries and overlaps between arts and sciences
- learning and experience
- tolerance and prejudice
- philosophy and religion

This is a novel that encourages questions: questions about the differences between reality and appearance, about tolerance and prejudice, about viewpoints both artistic and personal. It is also about social and class divisions as they existed in the seventeenth century: an age of promise and of prosperity, an age of enlightenment and of adventure. It is beautifully written, in a style that maintains a narrative momentum and attention to detail. It has many links across the curriculum, particularly in the areas of history, visual arts, science, philosophy, religion and classics.

APPROACH

For the purposes of this exploration, the novel has been divided into four units, covering four or five chapters at a time. The pace at which the novel is read is, however, entirely up to the teacher. Possible discussion points and language-based activities are listed at the end of each unit.

SUMMARY

When 'the finest potter in Delft' commissions a famous artist to paint a portrait of his daughter Louise, she reluctantly complies with his wishes.. She has belatedly

realised that she has been somewhat compromised by her friendship with the handsome but ruthless Reynier deVries, and an announcement of their betrothal is now expected by many. But in the Master's assistant, Pieter, Louise finds a soulmate with an artist's eye, an enquiring mind and an interest in science and philosophy as keen and genuine as her own. As Louise awakens to life, she discovers love and real friendship, and discovers too that truth is largely a matter of perception. Caught up in the excitement of the cultural and intellectual life of the town, Louise and Pieter also experience the prejudices, turbulence and fears of the period. The results are dramatic and wholly unexpected.

UNIT 1

SUMMARY

It is 1654. Sixteen-year-old Louise, daughter of a wealthy family of potters, is to have her portrait painted by Master Painter Jacob Haitink, assisted by his apprentice, Pieter Kunst. Master Haitink is initially reluctant to paint Louise, and it is only after they argue about Aristotle and Galileo that he sees her character and strength of personality and realises that he will have to try to capture her likeness. He agrees to the commission. Louise has a childhood friend, Reynier DeVries, whose father owns a large delftware factory. To her dismay, Louise finds the town is now presuming that she and Reynier are betrothed and her nurse Annie begins to chaperone her. Even the painting of her portrait comes to symbolise the end of her freedom.

Read Chapters 1– 4

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Not just *Wings Over Delft*, but the trilogy, is dedicated to Bill Darlison, described in the acknowledgements as 'friend, mentor and freethinker'. The word 'freethinker' is defined in the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* as 'a person who questions or rejects accepted opinions, especially those concerning religious beliefs.' Can you find other meanings for the word? Read the paragraph on p.31 where the Master asks Louise if her father is a freethinker, and consider her response. What does this tell you about her?
- Comparing her transparency to that of an empty glass, the Master reveals his fears that attempting to paint Louise will 'destroy' him. Consider carefully what he says about people's conceits (p.20). Do you agree with his assessment?
- From the very start Louise is troubled about her relationship with Reynier (p.11). Read carefully her account of the relationship as it developed (p.12), how she was 'wrong-footed' by Reynier who knew what marriage (and resulting merger) would mean for her father and how she finally accepted that the rumours meant inevitable change for her (pp.47–49). Consider too her metaphor for marriage (p.13) and say what this contributes to our growing understanding of her personality.
- Louise's relationship with her father is most particular, and he has more influence on her than does her mother, often mentioned only in passing and in terms of her absence, or described as 'translucent in her illness' (p.48). Discuss the probable impact on Louise when she is forced to accept

that her father couldn't have known that Reynier meant nothing to her (p.11), in the light of what she says about him on pages 31,32.

- Pieter and Reynier are different in almost every respect: one 'gloriously assured', the other given to stammering and lacking in confidence; one 'wonderfully ugly' with no social ambitions, the other clever, manipulative and with a keen eye to his future prospects. Say which qualities each would bring to a marriage with Louise, and discuss which of the two would be most suited to her circumstances and character.

ACTIVITIES

1. The very first paragraph makes it clear that Louise is a girl with a mind of her own, and a very independent streak. Start a word-portrait, writing down words that tell you about Louise, and add to these as you read. You might use a different colour for descriptive words found in each unit, as this can make it easier to see how her personality and character develops throughout the book. [The personality of Annie too makes an immediate impression on this first page: you might use a word like 'disapproving' to start a word-portrait of her.]
2. Read the first sections of 'The Song of Myself' by Walt Whitman, an extract from which is quoted under the dedication. Find out what you can about this American poet. Consider especially the lines quoted and write a paragraph outlining what you believe to be the poet's message. You might also suggest the reason the author selected this poem as the epigraph.
3. This book is laden with rich imagery, visual portraits conveyed to us in carefully chosen words. The Master sees Louise as 'a sneeze that will not come' (p.31), Pieter later says that she 'thrilled and shimmered' (p.19) while Pieter himself is described as having been 'blessed with too many bones' (p.41). Make a note of those phrases and expressions that most appeal to you, and say why you chose and why you enjoy these particular words.
4. The term 'tronie' (p.25) refers to a type of picture familiar from many examples by Rembrandt, Vermeer and their followers and refers to heads, faces or expressions. Tronies were meant as studies of type or character, the subject seldom if ever named; they were in effect paintings made

without commission for sale on the open market. On a website, find what you can about the life of Vermeer, find examples of tronies on a website and examine these, before giving your personal response to those that most impress you. A list of relevant art gallery websites is provided at the end of this guide.

UNIT 2

SUMMARY

Pieter's eloquence delights Louise and she is impressed with his artist's perspective on life. Their discussion convinces her that Pieter's mind is open and questioning, and she realises that she can never marry Reynier whose alleged interest in science was merely illusory. Her father's return makes her realise that her position is compromised not only by the townspeople's expectations, but also by her love for her mother whose fondest desire it is that Louise should marry well. She recognises too the importance of such a match for her father's business and other interests, and resolves to accept Reynier should he propose. She now looks forward to the painting of her portrait and to continuing discussions with her father.

Read Chapters 5–8

DISCUSSION

- This book is dedicated to the author's father, 'who would have heard the beggar sing'. This beggar has already been mentioned on p.25, Louise loves his portrait and feels that he lives. What does the story of the painting of the beggar at Begijnhof gate tell you about the author's feelings for his father?
- Louise has been brought up to 'question everything' (p.32) yet feels her arguing with the Master was 'unseemly' and cites her father's view that we 'must never undermine the beliefs of others' (p.55). Can one ever be certain that their beliefs are true? How might you convince someone of the validity and relevance of your beliefs without undermining theirs? Is it possible?
- Louise learns about the qualities of light, about grinding lapis lazuli, and compounding yellow, and that there

are 'thousands of greens' (pp.28–31). When Pieter looks at a landscape 'through tightly narrowed eyes', she copies him, reduces the view to essentials and 'smiles' as she makes a discovery (p.52). What does this tell us about Louise?

- The word 'kunst' means 'art' in German and Dutch. Read Pieter's account of how he discovered his artist's eye only when he finally abandoned his preconceived ideas (pp.57–60). Why does Louise find Pieter's vision both 'disturbing and exciting', and why does she feel she has been offered 'a forbidden fruit' (p.60)?
- Louise goes to bed reflecting on her 'new and exciting' discoveries and wakes to decide that she 'will be true' to herself and not marry anyone. She believes that her father will understand, that together they will 'explore the stars' and discuss philosophy (p.70). Re-assess her relationship with her father in the light of his comments on the morning of his return (pp.72–75) and later as he shares his excitement about Spinoza with her (pp.83–84).

ACTIVITIES

1. Delft might be described as a character in its own right, so central is it to this book. It is introduced as Louise looks through the rough glass from the second floor landing, is added to as Pieter gazes down on the town (p.17), and layers of description are added gradually, see pages 41, 49, 52. Using the internet or other sources, examine some famous paintings of European towns and consider these in terms of description (what you see), association (what they remind you of) and emotion (how they make you feel). Then give a critical and in-depth response.
2. Social and class divisions in the 1650s were clearly defined. The religion one professed might have advanced, hindered or even destroyed a career, as with the 'invisible barriers' to the advancement of Pieter's father's career (p.54). Craft guilds were organisations representing specialised workers, offering a certain amount of protection, rather as trades unions do now. [See pp. 68 – 72 in *Dublinia: The Story of Medieval Dublin* (978-0-86278-786-8) for information on how guilds were established in Dublin after the visit of King

Henry II in 1171–2]. Read pp.16–17, 50 and write Pieter’s application to join the Guild of St Luke.

3. The moment when Annie forces Louise to view the reality of her situation from the perspective of others is poignant (pp.75–77) as the modern reader sees this independent young woman forced to submit to financial and social constraints of the time (pp.78–80). Write the letter Louise might have written to Reynier explaining her hopes and fears and asking him to release her from their engagement.

4. ‘Mummery’ and ‘masquerade’ describe the transformation of the studio (p.86). Read Louise’s reaction to the ‘magical scene’, and picture her sitting in this ‘room’ surrounded by objects which will enable the viewer of her portrait to surmise certain things about her. To what is your eye drawn? Where is your point of perspective? If you could have placed other objects in this room, say what these might be and why you would have chosen them.

5. Father might be said to crystallise the arguments about science, religion and art when he tells Louise of the revelations he had experienced with Baruch (pp.93–97). Research the history of the period and consider how revolutionary for the time were the ideas expressed in these pages. Refer back to Louise’s earlier discussion with Pieter (pp.62–64) and say if you believe there is now room for ‘soul’ in science.

6. The Jewish quarter and its inhabitants are vividly described in the last chapter of this unit, the Jews appearing in marked contrast to the confident Calvinists exemplified by Annie. Find out what you can about the immense contribution of both Calvinists and the Jewish people to our current understanding of science and philosophy.

UNIT 3

SUMMARY

Louise continues to spend time at the studio, learning not only about the mixing and building of layers of colours, but also about the messages or codes incorporated by the artist in to each portrait and most importantly of all, about perspective. Louise spends more time in Pieter’s company, and they talk about astronomy, about painting and even about religion. But they do not talk

about her situation, nor about their relationship. Together they visit the home of Fabritius, a master painter, who recognises the alchemy between them. He is not alone in noticing: on his return home from a walk with Louise, Pieter is set upon and badly beaten.

Read Chapters 9–12

DISCUSSION

- Seventeenth century artists often used symbols to tell stories in their pictures. Objects included in the portraits would indicate something about their subjects. What reason do you think the Master might have for inserting a cupid, and why might the author have called the chapter by the same name?
- Pieter reacts badly to Louise’s simple question (p.109). Consider why he might have acted as he did, and discuss too Louise’s reaction to his response.
- ‘If only she were Annie ... Annie always knew what was right and what was wrong; God told her’ (p.113). Retrace the events of the book, placing Annie as the central character. How might she have reacted to the Master’s goading or to Reynier’s kiss? Support your arguments with evidence from the text.
- This is the first book in a trilogy and at times the author hints at a future for Louise (pp.117,134,139). Describe a future for her where she lives again.
- The Master’s studio is described in vivid detail (pp.20–22, p.120). What do you learn about the Master himself, but also about the times in which he lived, from the detailed inventory given here? Do you think that Fabritius’s studio would have been similarly furnished?
- ‘It is the people who look on my canvas that make it a work of art ... it is *they* who will finish my picture ... we will be dead...’ (p.141). Read pp.140, 141 and say if you agree with the Master, and why. Is his theory of relevance to Louise’s portrait and if so, how?

ACTIVITIES

1. Annie, ‘a strict Calvinist for whom God was a grim reality’, abhors Catholicism and fills Louise’s head with ‘gruesome detail of the Spanish Inquisition’ (p.101). Consider what you may have heard at second-hand

about another religion or culture, and write a paragraph detailing subsequent first-hand impressions. Read ***The Gods and their Machines*** (ISBN 978-0-86278-833-9) (pp.107,108) and consider how these characters react when they hear the truth about their cultures from another perspective.

2. As a result of her mother’s illness, Louise is left largely to her own devices and spends her days wandering about making friends with anyone who would talk to her (p.100). Write the dialogue, from Louise’s opening gambit, with one of those she might have ‘pestered’ with questions.

3. When Louise discovers that Pieter coluded with the Master by pretending to an ignorance neither had on the subject of Aristotle and Galileo, she is genuinely shocked (p.107). Re-read her argument with the Master (pp.32 – 36) and then write the conversation that might have occurred if she’d known he was only pretending.

4. Louise ‘looked at the canvas but didn’t like what she saw’ (p.117). ‘Demanding’, ‘disturbing’ and ‘argumentative’ are words used here to describe her. Write a formal letter of introduction to some authority figure who needs to know more about Louise’s character. Be honest and write about her as you really see her.

5. ‘What are religions other than creation stories?’ Read carefully pp.126 –131, paying particular attention to Louise’s dream of Hell on p.130. Explore the works of Hieronymus Bosch and write your personal response to some of his works.

UNIT 4

SUMMARY

Louise, suspecting Annie’s involvement in Pieter’s misfortune, confronts her and makes clear that she has never actually consented to her betrothal to Reynier, though he has been saying otherwise. Louise realises her true feelings for Pieter, and goes looking for him. When she finds the hidden place where Delft’s Roman Catholics attend Mass, she finds a riot about to begin, with a mob seeking to lynch Pieter. She confronts the crowd unsuccessfully, but Annie intervenes to avert disaster. Louise stays with Pieter, and sits at the back of the church, captivated by the beauty of

chapel and the rhythms of the Mass. Waves of emotion sweep over her as she realises that the religious experience of Annie and of these Papists is a shared one of belief in their interpretation of truth. The lapis lazuli needed to complete the portrait arrives. There is an explosion at the Powder Store.

Read Chapters 13–17

DISCUSSION POINTS

- 'Annie might scheme, but she could never lie' (p.149). Consider Annie's position and actions. She has done much to assist Reynier in his scheme to marry Louise, yet she acts to prevent Pieter's lynching at the hands of the mob. Has she always acted honourably?
- When asked if she has accepted Reynier's proposal, Louise doesn't lie though the truth denies her mother the comfort of knowing she is married and ends her father's dreams of a merger. Her father's reaction as he realises that she has been deceived by Reynier makes clear that she has not after all understood the depth of his love for her (pp.152–153). How and why has Louise underestimated her father's love?
- Attending the service in the secret church, Louise finds herself 'feeling as though she had been on the brink of a great discovery' (p.180). What might this discovery have been? Consider Louise's own description of her 'strange experience' or 'vision' (pp.186–187).
- Louise's life ends quite abruptly. Do you think her life has been worthwhile? What regrets might she have had, given the opportunity to look

back on it?

ACTIVITIES

1. Perspective or viewpoint is at the heart of this book, not only the literal geometric perspective of the painting, but also the personal perspectives of the various characters when confronting the same issue, and the emotional perspective that Louise's relationship with her mother creates. Mrs Eeden often appears to be at the centre or 'vanishing point', giving her an importance she would not at first glance warrant. Mentioned only in passing, she first appears 'pale and translucent in her illness' (p.48) but her role is nonetheless central. Just as the Master draws all eyes to Louise (pp.103–106), Mother's absence from the table draws the eyes of her family 'like a lodestone' (p.149). List other instances where perspective plays an important part in the novel.

2. Ireland and Spain are countries where the Roman Catholic religion has historically occupied a dominant position among the inhabitants, just as England and Holland are among those where Protestantism has traditionally dominated. Roman Catholics in Holland in the 1650s were an insecure minority. Compile a list of countries where minorities, religious or other, have their freedom restricted, and research organisations and agencies that try to address such situations.

3. Louise meets the goldfinch Mr Midas when she visits the studio of master painter Fabritius (p.123). Later, with Pieter, she follows Mr Midas as he tries to escape and sees him perched on the gutter watching them (p.189). The real-life painter Carel Fabritius, who painted the goldfinch, died in the explosion, aged only thirty-two. His painting *The Goldfinch* is easily accessible

on the internet. The painting is housed in Mauritshuis, the Hague. Jot down your immediate and personal response. You might also give your response to another of Fabritius's paintings, *The Watchman* (1654), now in the Art Museum of Schwerin, Germany.

4. Louise has died very young, but the book seems to suggest she has lived quite a full life, and has learned a lot. Write the obituary that might have appeared in a contemporary journal or newspaper.

5. The Powder Store explosion is a historical event (see Author Note, p.205). Can you find out more about 'the Delft thunderclap' and its effect on the people of the town? Read the pieces, 'borrowed' by the author from Dirck van Bleyswijck's graphic account of the explosion (pp.198–199) and then write a newspaper feature on the event as it might have appeared at the time.

Useful Art Websites

www.nationalgallery.ie - Irish National Gallery

www.nationalgallery.org.uk - British National Gallery

www.nga.gov - National Gallery of Art (US) in Washington DC

www.rijksmuseum.nl - Rijksmuseum, the main Dutch gallery in Amsterdam

www.mauritshuis.nl - The Mauritshuis, a Dutch gallery in the Hague (very close to Delft) with many works from the period.

Louise's adventures continue in *The Rainbow Bridge* (ISBN 978-0-86278-917-6) and conclude with *In the Claws of the Eagle* (ISBN 978-0-86278-827-7). Check out www.obrien.ie for more details of the Louise Trilogy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, Aubrey Flegg



Aubrey Flegg was born in Dublin. His early childhood was spent in County Sligo, Ireland. He went to school in Dublin and later in England. After a spell with a mountain rescue team in Scotland, he returned to Ireland to study geology at Trinity College. He then did geological research in Kenya, before joining the Geological Survey of Ireland in 1968. Aubrey recently took early retirement in order to concentrate on writing.



Also by Aubrey Flegg:

The Cinnamon Tree is a story of conflict, loss and friendship seen through the eyes of Yola, an African girl whose leg has been destroyed by a landmine.

(ISBN 978-0-86278-657-1)



Katie's War tells the story of Katie, a girl caught in the Irish Civil War who has divided loyalties: her shell-shocked father fought in the First World War and wants peace, but others want to fight for a united Ireland. (ISBN 978-0-86278-525-3)