



WAR CHILDREN

Dead Man's Music

ISBN 978-0-86278-776-9 pb

GERARD WHELAN

Teaching Guide

By Patricia England

RATIONALE AND THEMES

The six stories in *War Children* are set in the time of the Irish War of Independence and will be of particular interest to senior primary school classes and the junior cycle of second-level schools. This story deals with themes such as:

- Conflict
- Loss of innocence
- Revenge
- Influences of memories and childhood experiences on later life

SUMMARY

Mylie is thirteen years old when he finds the wounded man in the stable of the family farm. He remembers the incident vividly, and knows that that was the day he grew up. Mylie is well aware that he lives in dangerous times and that the 'Tans' will take revenge on any household found harbouring an injured rebel. He understands that family and farm mean more to his father than politics does, and his father angrily explains to him that he could never inform when Mylie first suggests contacting the police. Mylie is sent to fetch neighbours Paddy and Har Murray and Jamesy and Beeda Hogan to help with the man. The wounded man is dealt with and his tracks are covered by the men. Mylie's eyes are opened as he realises that these men are rebels and although he has known them all his life, he does not really know them at all. This discovery leads him to question everything from then on. In all his later life, he says, he never saw anything anywhere that surprised him more than what he saw that day because he never believed quite so completely in any world since.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Even when the man is fully recovered, Mylie thinks of him as the dead man. 'It was something dead in his eyes, something cold and far away' (p106). What image is conjured by the phrase 'dead man's music' (p107)? Read the whole paragraph carefully and discuss its impact.
- Think of an incident which you regard as a turning point or as a time when you suddenly realised you had grown up. Perhaps it was the day you realised a family relationship had changed in some way. Tell your partner all you can.
- 'I'm a valley man, after all: I see what I see, and I say what I say, but I never say the half of what I see' (p126). Consider this statement in the light of Mylie's comment on the valley people (p113). How then can it be true that '[we] had no secrets in our community'? How does his upbringing affect his adult outlook and his decision not to reveal anything to the television people?
- Mylie's discovery that the Murrays and Hogans are rebels has bigger implications for him (p121). What effect does this discovery have on the way he views life from then onwards?
- Mylie had seen more than one dead body, though he was only thirteen. Do you think people on farms are more used to dealing with death than are people who live in towns/cities? What do you think of the Irish tradition of 'waking' the dead? Do you think a wake might help the bereaved to deal with the grieving and recovery process?
- 'We can't just let him die. But he's even more trouble alive, that's for sure' (p110). What do you think Mylie's

father should have done? Did he do right?

ACTIVITIES

1. DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

Mylie gives a very effective description of the dead woman he discovered in the water (pp104, 105). Describe something which others might have found sad or repulsive, but which fascinated you and had a strange kind of beauty of its own. You may prefer to write this as a poem.

2. PERSONAL SAFETY

Mylie's father had to think about who he would ask him to help sort out his dilemma. List some difficult situations you might encounter. To whom might you turn for help and why? Investigate some agencies that might be able to help if you had no one else to turn to. How easy was it to find out information about them?

3. SURVEY ON NICKNAMES

Read how Beeda got his nickname (p115). Do you think nicknames are a sign of affection/popularity? Are nicknames ever used to bully people? Is it hard to get rid of a nickname you don't want? What was the most unusual nickname you ever heard? Plan a survey that asks questions like these, let people answer anonymously. Compile and discuss results: do they alter your view on any of the above questions?

4. WORD HUNT

The word *slawm* is used on p105. What do you think it means? Why has the author used this word? Read through the story for other words that might not be in the dictionary and say what they might mean.