



World Words

Stone Cradle

Louise Doughty

Teacher's Notes

The Text

The extract from Louise Doughty's novel, *Stone Cradle*, concerns the tragedy of infant mortality, particularly in vulnerable communities where the poorest members don't have the means to bury their babies. This vignette from the novel gives us a graveside view of secret burials carried out by a vicar helping the most impoverished in the community. It is told by a young woman who is herself pregnant and whose unborn child is thus at risk from the sickness sweeping the village. Out of this tragedy the young woman sees comfort in an unexpected way. The background for the story is a Romany community, and some Romany names and words are used.

Method

It is important that the students do some creative thinking before they engage with the poem, either by listening or by reading. In these teaching resources, more attention is paid to listening than reading.

When they have had the opportunity to explore the theme of the text and have contributed some of their own ideas, then they are ready to listen or read. There is no 'best' way to read. Some people like to read alone, silently; others prefer it to be a shared experience. Whichever method you use, there are some questions that you can ask to enhance understanding and interpretation of the piece. You can do this during the reading (if it is a shared experience) or afterwards, with a second read through if the first encounter was a solo affair. However, the authors would suggest the following method:

1. Students listen without referring to the text. Ask them to recall, orally, any words or phrases after the listening has finished.
2. Hand out a copy of the text and read through. Interrupt with questions (below) if appropriate.
3. Allow the students to listen again, this time with the text in front of them.

Now the students are ready to move onto the final part of the activities. These consist of following through ideas or themes, and a brief look at some of the language used. You may do both the activities, or only one, depending on time.

Pre-Listening Activity 1

Give the students the Pre-Listening and reading activity sheet but do NOT give them a copy of the text at this stage.

The pre-listening task is based around three pictures. The students are asked to connect the pictures by constructing a narrative which includes all three pictures (a marker stone for stillborn children, a child's toy at a gravestone, a silhouette of someone filling in a grave at night). They should work in small groups. They don't have to write the story down, though they should be encouraged to make notes. Give them a fairly short period of time in which to come up with a narrative to connect the pictures (in any order) and then be prepared to tell their story to the rest of the class. Suggest that the story may have some hope threaded into it! You may give them the added task of writing their story for homework.

Pre-teach this unusual vocabulary (from Romany)

gorjer a non-gypsy (derogative term)

mulla ghost

Pre-listening Activity 2

Give students the second pre-listening activity. Ask them to read through the quotations from the radio broadcast and decide who is saying what - writer or student. Then they must choose which category the quotation comes from and to write the appropriate letter in the appropriate square (see answer key below). They then listen to the broadcast to check their answers. The listening activity will have been made easier by this process of identification first.

- "When my father was growing up in the 1920s, he told me you didn't mention to anybody that you had gypsy blood - you'd get a brick through your window if you did."
- "Learning about these things from their perspective, it helps us to understand more about their culture and their way of life."
- "Although Clementina is born into a very traditional family, she herself is quite an unusual young woman and she does interpret things differently."
- "She describes these sounds so vividly, and it kind of gives the impression that everything else is silent."
- "The reader, when reading that piece, obtains information about their environment and therefore you learn about other cultures that way."
- "We are made up of all our ancestors, it's not just our parents but our grandparents and great great grandparents going way back, and for me to investigate those lives, it's a way of honouring how tough our ancestors lives were."
- "She's somebody who's got to be tough to survive. She's a feisty character."
- "The whole atmosphere is dark and sad because she has a grim setting, which is the graveyard, and she sets it off on a sombre note."
- "When the poor children of the parish died it was important for their parents that the children should be buried in holy ground."

	place	research	characters	cultures
The author		a, f, i	c, g	
The students	d, h			b, e

While Listening and Reading

1. Listen to the radio broadcast. Students to check their chart for pre-listening activity 2.
2. Ask them to feed back any words or phrases about the story that they remember. It doesn't matter how disjointed they are. As a class activity try to rebuild the text from collective memory. Some students will remember parts that others didn't.

Write what they feedback (and is collectively agreed on) on the board - writing the words or phrases in more or less the position on the board to correspond with where it occurred in the text. Gradually a patchwork of remembered phrases will appear. When the ideas stop flowing, prompt the class to paraphrase the story, using what they see on the board as notes.

Now play the recording again and then repeat the activity to see how many more of the gaps can be filled in.

3. Hand out a copy of the text. Allow a few minutes for the students to check what they have recalled with what is on the page.
4. Read through the text (this can be done individually). At appropriately timed spaces ask these questions:
 - Why were the funerals at night? (*because they were secret*)
 - Why did the vicar help the 'worst off of the parish'? (*speculation on part of reader*)
 - Why did the vicar give a coin to the narrator? (*to keep them quiet*)
 - Why was Dadus upset about this activity? (*he thought it would disturb the ghosts*)
 - What did the narrator think was 'a nice thing'? (*the thought of the children being in the arms of someone, even strangers, and the strangers having 'company'*)
5. Play the recording again. This time the students have the text in front of them.

After Listening Activities

The two activities suggested both involve forms of simple process writing. In the first activity (A) students will need to be reminded of comparative and superlative adjectives, particularly

more	less	most	least
greater	smaller	greatest	smallest
higher	lower	highest	lowest

You will also need to remind students of appropriate nouns for the adjectives to qualify (e.g. rate, deaths, number, survivals, health, sickness etc)

The second activity (B) is similar in that the students need to process statistical information. While the above (A) language will be useful, so will attention to using past, present and future tenses, with special reference to 'will' as predicting future events.

Both of these activities can be given as homework.

D Communication

Was Clementina, in your opinion, displaying courage or was she being foolhardy? (*open discussion*)

Stone Cradle

Lijah was born at a time when little children died often. Rich or poor, Traveller or *gorjer*, made no difference. If there was sickness in a village it could come a-knocking any time. Of course, it stood a better chance of getting in if you were poor.

That whole time I was carrying Lijah and we were living in the cottage in the graveyard, we would see them, the secret burials. They always happened at night. We would hear the creak of the cemetery gate, the turning of the handcart wheels on the gravel path. We would go to the door to watch. Past our cottage they would come, the vicar leading, praying as he came. Behind him would be a poor family, sobbing and sobbing, pushing the handcart with a little dead child wrapped in cloth and lying on it.

They were the worst off of the parish, folk who could not afford a plot of a gravestone of their own. They must have begged the vicar to put their little one in Holy Ground and he had found a way to do it. Him and his sexton together, they opened up a grave, in the dark, and put the little child on top and closed it up again. They opened up the graves in no particular order, as far as I could see, whoever they belonged to. They just worked their way along the rows.

After the first time we saw it happen, the vicar came over to us afterwards and gave us a coin not to say a word to anyone. We took the coin, of course, but it upset my Dadus. When they were gone and we were back inside, he said, didn't they realise that if they kept opening up the ground then the *mullas*, the ghosts, would be getting up and walking abroad? He thought it wasn't good for me to see it in my condition. My unborn child would be cursed.

But the next time we heard the creak of the gate and the turn of the wheels on the gravel, we still went to the door to watch, peering in the dark. I know it sounds peculiar, but I found something comforting in it. I thought it was good that these poor little children should not be put in the cold earth by themselves but should rest in the arms of someone, even if it was a stranger. And maybe it was nice for the folk already in their graves, lying there alone for all eternity, to be joined by a little girl or boy who would keep them company. I thought it a nice thing.