

Let's Think English GCSE: When the Wasps Drowned

PLEASE NOTE: this story is in the current AQA GCSE anthology

Reasoning pattern: Narrative sequencing

Overview

The activity explores the short story by Clare Wigfall “When the Wasps Drowned”. It works best as an introduction to the text so the students should be unfamiliar with the text. It focuses on the narrative structure of the story. Students are presented with an edited text (the opening episode of the story is omitted) and are asked to consider what do we learn about the narrator? Then they are presented with the omitted episode and asked to speculate and consider where it might feature in the story and why. This leads to consideration of how structure affects the reader’s understanding of the story including possible foreshadowing and aspects of characterisation.

Key words/phrases

narrator, structure, symbolism, foreshadowing

Materials

Edited and full Text of “When the Wasps Drowned”

Powerpoint.

Full text can be found at:

http://olibelas.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/8/6/12863257/when_the_wasps_drowned.pdf

Lesson plan

Concrete Preparation (whole class)

Read the story with the students but ensure you provide the edited text which omits the title and the opening episode. Ensure understanding of main events and characters. Clarify the term narrator if necessary. Ask students to consider what do we learn about the narrator of the story?

Social construction 1 (groups)

Ask students to consider: *Why don't the children tell their mother about the body?*

Take feedback after a short while. Students are likely to say that they were too frightened, but some may connect it with Eveline’s decision to keep the ring. This is a higher order thinking. If students don’t mention this possibility, suggest it and ask them to consider: *Why does Eveline want to keep the ring?* (She takes it from Therese and wears it.)

Take feedback. Students may say she's greedy or selfish, but higher order thinking may connect it with her wanting something valuable of her own, wanting to look more attractive or growing up.

Cognitive conflict (groups)

Explain to students one episode of the story had been omitted. Provide the omitted section – “That was the summer Therese stepped on the wasps’ nest...That was the summer they dug up Mr Mordecai’s garden” – and read with the students

Students are to consider: *Should this episode come at the start or at the end of the story?*

Ask students to explain their choices. Some may say it comes first to give us information about how hot it was and how the children had nothing to do. Some may pick up on digging up Mr Mordecai's garden as foreshadowing of what happens later.

Others may say it should come last, preferring the dramatic opening with Therese screaming. Higher order answers include that putting the missing section last gives the impression that Eveline was telling the story a long time afterwards. Perhaps she only now has the courage to tell what happened because she feels guilty about it.

Another high order answer is that if “That was the summer they dug up Mr Mordecai’s garden” is last, it hints they dug up a lot of the garden, not just one part. This would suggest Mr Mordecai could be a serial killer.

Draw out this possibility if the students don't come up with it.

Finally clarify that this is in fact the opening of the story.

Social construction 2 (individual, then groups)

Ask the students what they notice about how Wigfall describes Eveline – not how she looks after the others, but she herself.

Take individual answers. Students should pick up that she is now tall enough to see over the garden walls, she makes herself a bikini, she wears green plastic sunglasses, she rubs red colouring from the Smarties on her lips, she wears the ring and she pouts at the police officers.

Ask students to consider: *Why do you think Wigfall describes Eveline in these ways?*

Take feedback. Students will probably understand that we are to understand she is growing up, perhaps maturing physically. A high level response is that it is ironic that

she is growing up and sunbathing in the garden next to one in which a murdered girl is buried. In the photo the girl is “sun-browned” as Eveline is. As mentioned above, “they dug up Mr Mordecai’s garden” may mean they dug up all of it because there were more than one body, so Mr Mordecai is a serial killer.

Metacognition (groups – if short of time, divide class into two to consider one question each)

Ask the students to consider these 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?

Some students may find the wasps irrelevant to the story except as a dramatic opening, but others may see the dead wasps as foreshadowing the body in the garden or the wasps attacking Therese as a foreshadowing of the implicit threat facing the girls. Other students may find these parallels too remote to be effective. Some may suggest it’s difficult to give a more suggestive title without giving too much of the story away (higher order thinking).

On Eveline, some may suggest she is too absorbed in herself and her own feelings to express much feeling about the body; or that she has kept the ring and, even writing about it later, doesn’t want to admit it, so plays down the finding of the body. There may be other ideas.

Bridging

Ask students to re-write the story (or an episode) from a different narrative perspective. They could continue with first person narration using a different character: Therese or the Mum for example. Or they could experiment with adapting the narration to third person account.

OR

Ask students to consider how the title of the story might change if the narrator was different characters. For example:
What might the title of the story be if Therese was the narrator? The mother? Tyler?

AND

Link to other stories and poems studied with first person narrators. How reliable are they? How do they influence our understanding of the events?

When the Wasps Drowned

by Claire Wigfall

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.

Omitted episode

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.