

Flowers for James

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Overview

Charlotte knows something is wrong when she hears her parents talking anxiously during the night and when her grandmother is at her house in the morning. She is told she has a new baby brother, but the atmosphere is anything but festive. The adults keep avoiding her questions, and she is left to fill in the gaps herself – often incorrectly.

This narrative explores the impact of a baby's death on a girl and her family in the 1950s. Much is left unsaid in the text, so your students will need to look for clues to make sense of what's going on. In particular, inferring the historical context will help them to interpret the characters' behaviour.

The topic of this text is a sensitive one and may prompt some deep feelings. Be aware of any recent losses that your students have experienced and support them accordingly.

Note: English language learners new to New Zealand may have less knowledge about what happens when a sibling is born (going to hospital, staying with grandparents, notice in the newspaper, and so on) and about adults' behaviour after the death of a baby (in the 1950s) than other students.

Suggested reading purpose and teaching purpose

Based on the information I have about my students' learning needs, what would be appropriate reading and teaching purposes for the lesson?

- To explore a child's experience of a family death in the 1950s
- To support the students in developing the comprehension strategies of **inferring** and asking questions.

Suggested learning goal

We are learning to make inferences based on clues in the text to better understand the characters and what is happening.

Success criteria

To support our comprehension of the text, we will:

- identify what the author hasn't told us about the characters' behaviour and story events
- ask questions and use our prior knowledge to make inferences about the events and the characters' behaviour
- look for clues in the surrounding text and illustrations to support our inferences

- explore the effect a setting has on the events and characters' behaviour in a story.

Features of the text

What are the potential supports of this text in relation to my students' learning needs and to the reading and teaching purposes?

- **Text form:** A fictional narrative in the third person, using past-tense verbs.
- **Themes:** Death and how different people respond to it.
- **Language choices:** The way the author creates an atmosphere of tension, foreboding, and/or melancholy, for example, by:
 - including vivid details, especially ones involving meals and other domestic routines ("Charlotte dribbled syrup in swirls on her porridge", "Grandma's hard pink soap", "Charlotte said no to peaches from a tin")
 - leaving much unsaid or incompletely explained, especially in the dialogue ("It's too early", "Not good")
 - foreshadowing that something is wrong ("talking in high, anxious voices", "Her door closed with a click", "sitting in the chair where her mother usually sat", "past the cemetery", "but there were no flowers today")
 - using expressive verbs and adjectives ("burrowing", "curling", "dribbled", "bustling", "clumping", "tugged", "swooping")
 - using possible symbols of grief – "Rain spattered on the window", "The ammonia made her eyes run", "Another squall of rain hit the bedroom window", "like flocks of starlings".
- **Specific vocabulary:** "burrowing", "curling", "porridge", "syrup", "steaming", "dribbled", "swirls", "risking", "headstones", "daffodils", "bustling", "roast", "coal range", "spattered", "wandered", "smelling salts", "stopper", "clumping", "squall", "tugged", "plait", "tucked", "swooping", "starlings", "slid", "match heads", "poppies", "elderberry".

Readability

Noun frequency level: 9–10 years for guided reading

What text features might challenge my students and require a prompt or a brief explanation?

- The themes of death and grief, and the fact that Charlotte's experience is very different from that of many children today
- Particular words and concepts, including "anxious", "burrowing", "smelt", "syrup", "stick up for her", "cemetery", "headstones", "daffodils", "coal range", "shirtsleeves", "smelling salts", "stopper", "ammonia", "clumping", "squall", "railway workshops", "swooping", "starlings", "poached eggs", "blue match heads", "scent", "papery red poppies", "elderberry"
- The range of time frames and verb forms.

What prior knowledge or experience might help my students to read this text?

- **Personal knowledge:**
 - Their experiences of loss
 - Their experiences of adults not telling them things
- **Topic/content knowledge:** Their knowledge of the 1950s and their understanding that people of that era may have behaved differently from people today
- **Literacy-related knowledge:** Familiarity with reading stories that require much inference.

A framework for the lesson

How will I help my students to achieve the reading purpose and the learning goal?

Before reading

- Introduce the reading. Inform the students that the story takes place in the 1950s. Briefly discuss what it was like then and people's attitudes. (Making connections)
- Discuss the title. "At what times do people get flowers, and who gets them? I wonder who James is?" (Making connections; forming hypotheses)
- Tell the students that much in this text is left unsaid or is incompletely explained. "We're going to look for clues to fill in the gaps, just as the girl in the story does." Review what the process of inferring involves, especially noticing the gaps, asking questions about them, looking for clues to the answers, and checking inferences as you read on. We will also be noticing how knowledge of the setting (the 1950s) impacts on how we bring meaning to the story. (Inferring; asking questions)
- Share the learning goal and success criteria with the students.

During reading

Refer to Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5 to 8, pages 80–93, for information about deliberate acts of teaching.

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- Read the first two paragraphs to the students. Model the process of inferring. "I'm a bit confused about what's happening here. Let's look for some clues." Discuss why the parents might be talking in "high, anxious voices" and why they might have shut Charlotte's door. "Is there enough information to tell us what's going on yet?" (Inferring; asking questions)

- Ask the students to finish reading the page. “Is there something here that clarifies what’s going on?” Discuss why Charlotte might be getting syrup “just this once” and whether Grandma lives in the house. “What makes you say that?” Draw attention to “Charlotte knew something was different”. (Inferring)
- “I’m also wondering how Charlotte’s feeling and where Mum and Dad are. Let’s keep these questions in mind as we read.” (Inferring; asking questions)

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- “When I first read this, I wondered what ‘risking one more’ referred to. What do you think?” Establish that it means “one more question” by referring to “Something in Grandma’s voice discouraged more questions.” Notice the way Grandma avoids Charlotte’s second question by telling her to eat up. Discuss why she might not want Charlotte to keep asking questions. (Inferring; asking questions)
- Discuss how Charlotte and Grandma feel about having a new baby. “What in the text makes you say that?” Also ask for confirmation on whether Grandma lives with Charlotte. If necessary, draw attention to “Charlotte walked down the hill to Grandma’s house”. (Inferring)

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- “I’m interested in the way the grandparents are behaving. How much attention are they giving Charlotte?” Explore Grandma’s dismissive behaviour (“bustling about”, “Go and find something to read”) and how Grandpa says little to Charlotte when he comes in, although he does address her warmly and gives her a kiss. “Why do you think they’re behaving like this?” (Inferring)
- Explore Charlotte’s behaviour in her grandparents’ bedroom. Discuss what “put it [the brush] back exactly where she found it” and “quickly replaced the bottle” suggest. “How do you think she is feeling?” Draw out how confused Charlotte must be. (Inferring; making connections)

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- Confirm Charlotte’s feelings: “Charlotte wondered if her parents were so excited about the new baby they’d forgotten about her.” “Do you think that’s true? Why or why not?” (Inferring; making connections)
- Draw attention to “Not good” (on the previous page) and elicit what Charlotte thinks it refers to – first her own behaviour and then the weather. “I’m wondering whether she’s got it right?” Then discuss her interpretation of “Her father wants her home, but he can’t manage yet.” Ask whom the “her” refers to. Notice how people keep avoiding Charlotte and her questions (“It’s time to go to sleep”) and how, as a result, she fills in the gaps herself – not necessarily correctly. (Analysing and synthesising; inferring)

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- Be aware of how your students react to the discovery of the baby's death and respond appropriately. Make the connection between the death and everything you've discussed about the adults' behaviour. Also make the connection with "It's too early" in the first paragraph of the text in terms of why the baby might have died. (Making connections; inferring)
- Draw attention to "the notice in the paper" and, if necessary, clarify what it refers to. Briefly discuss what information death notices normally contain. "Why do you think the notice says 'no flowers'? Who might have decided that?" (Making connections; inferring)
- Check that the students understand where Charlotte wants to go when she says "I want to come". Discuss her reaction to being told she's too young to attend the funeral. Draw attention to "Charlotte said no to peaches from a tin" and elicit what it suggests about the way she is feeling. Note that the peaches in a tin would have been a treat, especially in the 1950s. (Inferring)
- Discuss how Charlotte ignores the request on the death notice and collects flowers for James. "Why do you think she does that?" Discuss her father's reaction to her gesture. Notice that this is the first time he is overtly affectionate with her and answers one of the first things she wanted to know about the baby. "What do you think this means to Charlotte? Why?" (Inferring; analysing and synthesising)

After reading

- Revisit the title and draw out the importance it places on Charlotte's role at the end, especially in prompting an emotional reaction from her father. Then focus on the last paragraph. Ensure that the students understand that "His own name" refers to the father's name and to the fact that the baby was to share it. "What does 'then was gone' in the final line suggest to you?" Explore the possibility that Charlotte's father (and mother) may be "gone" in an emotional sense for quite a long time, such is the impact of a baby's death. "James" in the title could, in fact, refer to the father as much as to the baby. (Analysing and synthesising; inferring)
- Revisit the characters' behaviour in the text. Specifically discuss how the adults avoided Charlotte's questions, didn't tell her what was going on, and showed her little physical affection. Notice how Charlotte asserted herself only at the end. Then discuss the influence of the era on the characters' behaviour. Talk about how they were probably feeling, given the baby's death. Discuss how, even today, people deal with loss and grief in different ways. (Analysing and synthesising; making connections)
- Speculate on how different Charlotte's experience might have been today. "Would she have been allowed to go to the funeral? Would people have

explained things to her more?” Discuss how attitudes to death and to young people change over time and also differ across cultures. In New Zealand, for instance, Māori culture has had a significant impact on Pākehā attitudes, and vice versa. (Making connections)

- With the students, review the learning goal and success criteria and reflect on how well the learning goal has been achieved. “In a text like this, where so much is left unsaid, how important is it to ‘fill in the gaps’ by inferring? How did your inferences help you to understand the text?” Discuss how inferences can be incorrect, as the students’ early inferences about the characters’ behaviour may have been. In the text, Charlotte’s inferences about what she heard people saying were also wrong (pages 28 and 31). “Did she have enough information to go on?” Emphasise the importance of reviewing inferences whenever new information comes to light. (Inferring)
- Note any teaching points for future sessions.

Links to further learning

What follow-up tasks will help my students to consolidate their new learning?

The students could:

- explain and share, with a buddy or group, following silent or independent reading, how and where inferring helped them to better understand a text (Inferring)
- identify and explore the aspects of the text that foreshadow the baby’s death (for example, “past the cemetery”), including the symbols of grief (for example, “The ammonia made her eyes run”) (Analysing and synthesising)
- identify the details in the text that relate to meals and other domestic routines, and explore the role of these routines during times of grief, particularly in giving people something to do, keeping up a semblance of normality, and providing something to talk about – or a reason not to talk (Analysing and synthesising; making connections)
- read other stories that convey a strong sense of time and place, for example, Elsie Locke’s *The Kauri and the Willow*. (Making connections)