



# WAR CHILDREN

## *Services Rendered*

ISBN 978-0-86278-776-9 pb

GERARD WHELAN

### Teaching Guide

By Patricia England

#### RATIONALE AND THEMES

This short story is set in the time of the Irish War of Independence and will be of particular interest to students in senior primary school and in the junior cycle of second-level schools. This story deals in a humorous manner with themes such as:

- Death and loss
- Conflict
- Betrayal
- Loss of innocence
- Revenge

#### SUMMARY

Mr Murphy has died suddenly and it is the night before the funeral. The Murphys' two sons are Volunteers on the run and may not be aware that their father is dead. Mr Murphy had had no sympathy for their politics and their home has been raided half a dozen times in the last few months. Daughter Eily, who makes no secret of her contempt for the soldiers, has disregarded her mother's wishes and contacted a republican undertaker. Captain Cobbett, a respectful and apologetic young man, has previously raided the house and is asked to do so again as the body lies in the 'parlour'. Mrs Murphy makes him feel dreadful and he calls his men off without making a proper search. When Mrs Murphy faints she is taken next door at his suggestion. While she is gone three men arrive. One of these is the Murphys' son, Myles. The men lift the body out of the coffin and remove ammunition stored under the body. Myles feels his father would have found this funny if he heard of it happening to someone else. Katherine is uncomfortable but Eily is triumphant. Their mother returns just after the men have left.

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

- 'Certainly his mouth was the bit of himself that Mr Murphy had used most, whether giving out about the world and his family or filling it – when he could – with porter' (p129). Read the story taking note of the several instances hinting at the old man's sense of humour. Say if you would you have enjoyed his company and give reasons.
- 'Every jumped-up gombeen man in Ireland would put on a morning suit and queue up to get to the trough, and the bishops would be standing over them, grinning, blessing them on their way' (p131). To what extent had Mr Murphy's predictions been proved accurate by the mid-1950s?
- '... And childer have no business being right – it's not natural' (p140). Discuss Nellie's views on children's upbringing. Why did Jack's more enlightened approach cause him to be compared to 'a Protestant or a Freethinker'?
- Mr Murphy and his children appear to hold totally different views but do you think they were more alike than they realised? From what you know of them, which of the children do you think is most like Mr Murphy? Why?
- 'Is it any wonder that half the young people are rebels? Youse are turning them against yourselves, so you are, with this kind of carry on' (p144). What kind of woman does Mrs Murphy prove to be when soldiers arrive to search the house in which her dead husband lies?
- 'Captain Cobbett was a tall man, and Mrs Murphy was a small woman, but there was no doubt who was intimidated by whom' (p144). What type of a man is Captain Cobbett?

What kind of a relationship did he have with Mr Murphy when he was alive? Do you think he is a weak man? Support your opinions with evidence from the story.

- 'Eily had put the two pennies back on her father's eyes, but still Katherine seemed to feel him looking at her' (pp155-6). Eily and Katherine both support the rebels and know about the hidden ammunition. How do their personalities differ? How do they react to the men when they came to collect the ammunition? What do you think Katherine feels about Eily? Do you think the girls loved their father equally?

#### ACTIVITIES

##### 1. DEBATE

Conflict between parents and their children is a normal part of growing up. Write an argument outlining support or opposition to this statement.

##### 2. CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

Father Owens told Jack 'it was a parent's duty to chastise their childer' (p140) but Jack 'would have none of it.' Debate the motion 'Parents do not have the right to physically punish their children.'

##### 3. LETTER WRITING

Write a letter to Eily. Tell her if you admire her or not and explain how you feel about Mr Murphy's coffin being used to store and hide ammunition.

##### 4. DRAMA

Use role-play to explore some situation, eg. Eily making the arrangements with the undertaker/Mrs Murphy's confrontation with the captain/Mrs Murphy's conversation with Nellie/Captain Cobbett reporting back to his Colonel on the raid.