



# WAR CHILDREN

## *The Poor Cow*

ISBN 978-0-86278-776-9 pb

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### Teaching Guide

By Patricia England

#### RATIONALE AND THEMES

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

- Death and loss
- Conflict
- Betrayal
- Loss of innocence
- Influences of memories and childhood experiences on later life

#### SUMMARY

When the Quinns notice Tans passing through the yard, they worry about the safety of their cow, Hannah. Larry's mother agrees that he should check, warning him to come straight back. He meets a neighbour who tells him that the cow is safe with the Sinnotts. He decides to collect her and when he nears the farm he meets Matt Sinnott who, along with a stranger, questions him about the Tans. He realises that the stranger may be connected with a recent ambush on the Tans. Suddenly he hears hoofbeats. His father shouts that Tans are nearby and pulls Larry onto the horse. On the journey home, they hear gunfire coming from the the farm. His father tells him they must leave the area immediately. Larry's mother had been tricked into informing on the Sinnotts, in return, she hoped, for news about her son. As the family leaves the district they see flames coming from the direction of the Sinnott's farm. Larry's mother keens sorrowfully for all that they have lost and Larry knows they will never be able to return. He is an informer's child.

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Has this story got a strong opening? Does it quickly get your attention? Is this especially important in a short story? Consider the other stories – do all capture your interest from the start?
- 'I should have told my Mam what I was doing, I know. Everything would have been all right if I'd only done that.' (p162). This story is told with the benefit of hindsight. Do you think this is an effective way to tell the story? Does it add to the sense of impending doom?
- 'That's often how bad things happen: not because somebody means to do ill but because they don't think about what they're doing at all' (p165). Can you understand why Larry decides to collect the cow? How might you have acted in similar circumstances? Were your parents or guardians ever worried about your whereabouts?
- 'Sinnott's roadside farmhouse looked lovely and snug just a mile or so ahead of me' (p166). Compare the scene described by Larry as he approaches the farmhouse to collect the cow with the nightmarish scene he later imagines happening on the farm. Does the author paint a convincing picture of how fine the line is between order and chaos, between life and death?
- 'My own father worried that he'd have no farm to leave to me. Sinnotts didn't have such worries' (p170). Why is this passage ironic in the light of what happens later in the story?
- 'When I walked out our kitchen door today to look for Hannah I had walked into a different world. It had looked just like the world I knew but it had been populated by devils' (p189). Do you think Larry will be able to forgive

himself in the future? Do you think he blames his mother? What would you say are the main lessons he has learned from this awful experience?

#### ACTIVITIES

##### 1. A GOOD BEGINNING

Write the first paragraphs of a short story, making it attention-grabbing so that the reader will be interested from the outset.

##### 2. RESEARCH

Think about the ways we show hospitality to a visitor. Find out how hospitality is shown in other cultures.

##### 3. ANCIENT SUPERSTITIONS

Find out more about the Banshee (p190) and other customs and superstitions related to the supernatural.

##### 5. MAKING LISTS

Imagine you have to leave your house in a hurry. Write a list of the things you would take with you. Work in pairs and tell your partner why you have chosen these items.

##### 6. DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

Imagine you are Larry and you return to the area as an old man. Describe your feelings and what you see remaining of the places you once knew. Do you still feel that the events of that day happened because you had 'thoughtlessly' gone to look for Hannah? Is the sense of horror still with you or has time dimmed it? **Or** You have discovered that Matt Sinnott is still alive fifty years later. He was the only family member who survived that terrible day. Write a letter to him explaining your mother's actions and setting the record straight.