

Nina Bawden's *The Peppermint Pig*: A look at the book through Drama

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KS2

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Introduction

Nina Bawden's *The Peppermint Pig* won the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize in 1976, and has been considered a children's classic ever since. It is full of down-to-earth humour and gutsy realism and makes an ideal starting point for upper KS2 drama work.

This scheme examines some of the book's key episodes and themes, using drama to extend students' knowledge of the book as a whole. Students will gain experience of exploring facial expression and body language through tableaux work, and will create and sustain roles through improvised and devised scene exercises. They will participate in classroom discussion and debate, present their work in front of their peers, and be encouraged to comment constructively on the work of others. The scheme broadly covers the drama objectives of the KS2 National Curriculum.

Learning objectives

By the end of this scheme the students will:

- ▶ Have used a range of dramatic techniques to explore *The Peppermint Pig*
- ▶ Have experience of creating and sustaining roles
- ▶ Have explored characterisation through body language and facial expression
- ▶ Have experience of working in small groups to produce tableaux and short scenes
- ▶ Have developed their spoken language skills
- ▶ Have developed their listening skills
- ▶ Have experience of presenting their work in front of their peers
- ▶ Have experience of constructively responding to the work of others.

Lesson 1: From London to Norfolk

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson the students will:

- ▶ Have experience of responding physically to an extract of text
- ▶ Have explored the use of facial expression and body language through tableaux
- ▶ Have experience of working collaboratively in pairs
- ▶ Have considered the ethics behind taking the blame for someone else
- ▶ Have developed their scene-creation skills
- ▶ Have developed their listening skills
- ▶ Have experience of presenting their work in front of their peers.

Students should be familiar with *The Peppermint Pig* to at least the end of Chapter 4 for this lesson.

Warm-up: Idyllic life in London (10 mins)

This is a warm-up game to get everyone focussed and beginning to think about the book.

Ask students to spread out around the space. Explain that you are going to read aloud a section from Chapter 1 and that while you do so students should respond physically to what they hear. Physical responses may include acting out the words they hear, demonstrating an emotional response to the words, portraying characters or inhabiting the mood of the piece. Students may work together or in pairs or groups; however at no point should they use words or discuss what they are going to do. The responses should be improvised.

Read aloud the section that begins, '*George was often right about things*', and ends with '*tiny scrapings of real gold, thin as tissue ...*'.

Take a moment after the exercise to reflect with students on what they gleaned from listening to and responding to this section of text. What feeling does this

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section give us? What is Nina Bawden trying to tell us through this description of Poll and Theo's lives in London?

Tableaux exercise (15 mins)

Divide the class into groups of three.

Remind students about the episode in Chapter 1 when Father comes home and tells Mother what has happened at work, and about his plans to go to America, all of which Poll hears from under the table.

Allow a short period of time for discussion. How does Mother react when Father tells her what has happened? What is Poll's response to what she hears?

Next, challenge students to create a series of tableaux in their groups, to depict this part of the story. How can they use body language and facial expression to demonstrate the events, characters and emotions?

Allow time to see a few groups perform their tableaux in front of the rest of the class. Invite feedback from the audience: how well have the trio brought this section of text to life through their freeze frames?

Classroom discussion: Does Father do the right thing? (10 mins)

Reflect as a whole class on Father's decision to take the blame for the theft.

Do students feel he did the right thing? What would they have done if they were in his shoes? What is Mother's point of view?

Quick-fire improvisation exercise: This is Poll and Theo (10 mins)

Ask students to get into pairs, and to decide between them who will portray Poll for this exercise, and who will portray Theo.

You are going to call out some of the things that the children did during their early days in Norfolk, and each time the pairs should quickly arrange themselves into a frozen image of the duo doing the activity/in that moment. You should start each directive by saying 'This is Poll and Theo ...', and finish off by saying what they are doing. You can then count down from five, and by the end of the countdown the pairs should have arranged themselves into a frozen image.

Remind students that the aim of the exercise is to use facial expression and body language to really try to show the *attitude* that each of the characters has. How do they feel about what they are doing? How can students portray interest, excitement, anxiety or other specific emotions?

You can call out any of the things Poll and Theo did during their early days in Norfolk, however, here is a list that would work well:

- ▶ Looking around the town
- ▶ Looking at the family graves in the churchyard
- ▶ Playing with hoops in the street
- ▶ Meeting Mrs Marigold Bugg
- ▶ Driving with their parents in the trap
- ▶ Burying the gold in the garden
- ▶ Skating on Eel's Pit
- ▶ Arguing with Noah Bugg.

Listening: Theo and the vest (10 mins)

Read aloud the section from Chapter 4, from the opening of the chapter to 'Poll began to cry too, in sympathy'.

Allow a moment for students to reflect as a group on what is going on here. Why is Theo unhappy about the vest, and why is Mother making him wear it?

Improvisation in small groups (15 mins)

Divide the class into small groups. Four or five students per group should work well.

Ask each group to think of a modern-day situation, in which a young person is told to wear something that they do not want to wear. Ask them to imagine what the situation is, who the characters are, and what the outcome is. Does the young person go ahead and wear the item, as Theo does?

Allow three to four minutes of planning, and then ask the groups to get up on their feet and to start developing their scenes.

After ten minutes, ensure that each group is going back over their scene, ready to have a finished product within the next five minutes or so.

Spotlight the scenes (15 mins)

Give each group a chance to show part of their scene, using the 'Spotlight' technique. This technique is useful for allowing lots of groups to perform a little, without taking up too much time.

KS2 students will often misjudge timings during scene development exercises; regular nudges to ensure that they are on track are very helpful.

Each group should find a space in the room in which to perform their scene. When you clap your hands, all the groups start their scene at the same time.

If you go and stand next to a particular group, that group and that group only should continue performing. Everyone else will pause to watch them. When you walk away everyone picks up where they left off, and you repeat this exercise until everyone has had a chance to perform.

If a group finishes their performance they should setback and start from the beginning again.

Plenary (5 mins)

Draw the lesson to a close by reflecting with the class on what they think making the move from London to Norfolk was like for the children. It was not something that Mother would have wanted, but was it a good thing in the end? What were the specific challenges they faced?

Lesson 2: All about Poll

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson the students will:

- ▶ Have collaboratively examined character through the Role on the Wall exercise
- ▶ Have developed their listening skills
- ▶ Have experience of working creatively and collectively through the Essence Machine exercise
- ▶ Have considered the internal thoughts of the characters through the Thought Tapping exercise
- ▶ Have participated in Classroom discussion.

It is important that students are familiar with the book to at least the end of Chapter 5 for this lesson.

Warm-up game: What are you doing, Poll? (10 mins)

Ask students to stand in a circle.

The first student to go turns to the person next to her and says 'What are you doing, Poll?'. The person next to her replies by saying an activity that Poll does in the book, or something that she might do. Examples might be:

- ▶ Petting my pig
- ▶ Ice skating
- ▶ Shopping at the market.

The first student must then mime whatever the person next to them has said.

This continues around the circle until everyone has had a turn.

Role on the Wall: Poll (15 mins)

Students are now going to explore Poll's character through the Role on the Wall exercise.

Divide students into groups of four or five.

Give each group a long strip of paper, and a marker pen. One student from the group should lie down on the paper, and the others should draw a rough outline of their body onto the paper. This outline now represents Poll.

Around the outside of the outline, groups should write facts that they know about Poll. These may include who her family are, where she lives, etc.

Inside the outline, students should write Poll's thoughts and feelings. These should be in the first person.

Towards the end of the exercise, take a couple of minutes to review the work, noting in particular where groups have made the same choices and where they have differed. Then set the Role on the Wall papers aside to come back to later.

Listening: Poll at Bride's Pit (10 mins)

Read aloud the section from Chapter 5 that begins 'She had not really been lost' and ends 'a dark dream in her mind and had no shape at all'.

Take a couple of minutes following this extract for students to reflect on this section of text. What is the atmosphere? How does it make them feel?

Essence Machine: Poll at Bride's Pit (15 mins)

Students are now going to make a physical 'machine' to convey the essence of this section of text.

One student will start in the middle of the space, and will offer a repeated sound and action that in some way brings to life Poll's experience at Bride's Pit.

Resources needed

- ▶ Long strips of paper (long enough to draw a student's body outline on) and suitable pens for writing on this paper.

When a second student has an idea, they join in, offering a different sound and action along the same theme that links to and complements that of the first student. The exercise continues with more and more students joining in.

When the 'machine' feels complete, prevent further students from joining in, and experiment with conducting the Essence Machine. What happens if everyone gets louder or softer at the same time? Can the machine slow down? Students not involved in the machine can observe the impact of changing the volume or speed.

Repeat the exercise a few times so that everyone can have a go at being part of the machine.

Listening: Poll gets home (10 mins)

Read aloud the section from Chapter 5 that begins 'The front door stood open', and ends 'and ran upstairs, weeping'.

Ask students to reflect on this section of text. Why do they think Aunt Harriet and Mother react the way they do? Why does Poll end up crying?

Tableaux with thought tapping (15 mins)

In their Role on the Wall groups, ask students to create a tableau that portrays the scene when Poll arrives home. Give them a couple of minutes to create the scene.

Each group will come up into the space and create their tableau for everyone else to see. When they are in the tableau, ask for volunteers to stand behind each actor. One by one, the volunteers will tap their actor gently on the head. When they do so, the actor should speak – *in character* – saying what they are thinking at that exact moment in time.

Classroom discussion (10 mins)

Ask students to reflect on why this event happens to Poll. Why is she walking by Bride's Pit in the first place? What is her first reaction, and how does she later explain it to Theo?

What does this tell us about Poll's character? Having considered this episode, why it happens and how Poll reacts to it, is there anything students would like to add to their Role on the Wall papers?

Finalise Role on the Wall (5 mins)

Take the last few minutes of the session for students to make any amendments or additions to their Role on the Wall papers. If you have the space, these can be displayed around the classroom after the session, and used to inspire further imaginative work.

Lesson 3: Scarlet Fever

Learning objectives

By the end of this lesson the students will:

- ▶ Have experience of creating and sustaining roles through the large group improvisation exercise
- ▶ Have further experience of listening and responding to extracts of text
- ▶ Have experience of scene creation around one of the more sensitive and challenging themes in the book: illness in the family
- ▶ Have experience of conveying character in written form.

It is important that students are familiar with the book to at least the end of Chapter 6 for this lesson.

Listening: In the church (10 mins)

Read aloud the section of text from Chapter 6 that begins 'She was so hot in Church on Easter Sunday' and ends 'and cold stone beneath her'.

Ask students to reflect on what the author has neglected to tell us in this section of text. She deliberately omits certain information as she is telling the story from Poll's perspective. What information has been excluded?

Large group improvisation (15 mins)

One by one, students are going to build a tableau of the scene in the church, and then bring the scene to life.

One student starts by entering the playing space, and taking up a position as one of the people in the Church. For clarity, allow them to say who they are.

Other students may now join the tableau, building on what they see. Allow

Challenge students to see beyond the obvious choices when they express what their character is thinking in the tableau. For example, while Aunt Harriet might be expressing anger, perhaps her internal thoughts include those of relief, or fear for Mother.

There are no right or wrong feelings to express here, as long as they are in line with the text, however, encourage students to think beyond the text and into the deeper thoughts of the characters themselves.

the tableau to become quite full, so that we have not just the 'key players' in the scene, but the onlookers too.

When the scene appears to be full, clap your hands, signalling for the tableau to come to life. Students should improvise the imagined scene in the Church. Let the scene play out until Poll is taken outside to the Churchyard, or stop it beforehand if it becomes confused.

Repeat the exercise so that other students get to have a go at being in the tableau.

Group scene creation: *Scarlet Fever in the village* (15 mins)

She heard the passing bell begin to toll. It would ring seven times for a man, six for a woman, three for a child. Poll lay in her bed, dreamily listening. ONE – a horse clattered by in the Square. TWO. THREE. – and the deep sound trembled on the air as if the bell were sorry to stop so soon. Four, five, six, the voice of death sang, but these last peals were only echoes. Mother came into her room and told her that the Dowsett baby was dead. Not little Tom, but his bouncing, three-year-old brother.

In the book, we learn that many people in the town have been affected by Scarlet Fever. Students are now going to be challenged to create a scene about a family in this position.

Divide the class into groups of five or so. Ask them to create a scene that shows a family affected by Scarlet Fever. They should decide who in the family is ill (is it a parent or a child?), and whether in the scene we will witness the family in the middle of coping, or at the outcome. Does the sick person survive, or not?

Students have around fifteen minutes to create, cast and rehearse the scene to show to the rest of the class. Keep reminding them of time throughout the process in order to keep them moving forward and on track with the project.

Performing the scenes (20 mins)

Allow each group to perform their scene in front of the rest of the class.

Invite feedback from the audience after each scene. How well did the scene portray the family? Were the characters, and their feelings about the situation, clear?

Writing in role (20 mins)

Students will now express the character of Poll in written form.

Ask them to imagine that Poll decides to write a letter to Annie, during the time in which her fever has passed but she has to stay in isolation in her little room. What will she tell Annie about her experience? What would she like to know about what is going on in the outside world?

Remind students that participating in the tableau does not necessarily mean that they will take a leading role. There is a tendency in this exercise for too many people to try to speak at the same time. Remind them that it is possible to be in the scene without speaking a lot, if at all. Sometimes it is ok to react silently to what is going on.

Lesson 4: The Peppermint Pig

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson the students will:

- ▶ Have considered the ethics around the killing of animals for meat
- ▶ Have experience of formulating arguments and the use of persuasive language
- ▶ Have further explored scene creation and performance
- ▶ Have participated in classroom discussion.

Students should have finished their reading of *The Peppermint Pig* for this lesson.

Classroom discussion: *Johnnie's fate* (10 mins)

Ask students to reflect on their reading of the book. When did they first get the idea that Johnnie would be killed for meat? Is this something they saw coming or was it a surprise?

Classroom debate preparation (10 mins)

Divide the class into four groups. Explain that one of the groups is going to develop an argument *in favour* of Johnnie being killed for meat, and that one will develop an argument *against* it.

During the preparation time, groups should nominate a scribe to make notes on everyone's suggestions for the argument, and one or more speakers to present the argument to the rest of the class.

Meanwhile, the other two groups, who will form the deciding jury once the arguments have been presented, should consider the use of persuasive language. What methods could the two opposing sides use to try to get them to agree to their points? Ask each group to create a list of the kind of things they might be looking out for.

Classroom debate (15 mins)

The jury will now hear the arguments presented by the two sides.

Allow each team to present their argument. After both teams have delivered their initial presentations, invite them back and allow the jury to ask a few questions to each. How well can they back up the argument they have just presented?

At the end of the exercise take a vote from the jury. On the basis of what they have just heard, was it correct, or incorrect, to kill Johnnie for meat?

Debate conclusion (10 mins)

Having come to a decision, ask students to reflect on how hard it was to do. Did their vote surprise them? Did any of the jury members vote in a way that they themselves would not have expected before the arguments were presented? How hard was it to create arguments for or against if they truly believed the opposite?

Ask the jury to feed back to the two presenting groups. How well did they use persuasive language to try to win the debate?

Scene creation: Who is Johnnie? (15 mins)

Johnnie, the peppermint pig, gone now like this whole, long year of her life, but fixed and safe in her mind, for ever and ever.

She said, 'Johnnie's dead.'

Father looked at her, puzzled, but smiling. He cupped her chin in his hand and said, 'My darling, who's Johnnie?'

Students should now continue to work in the four groups that they were in for the debate exercise.

As if in answer to Father's question, each group will take an episode from Johnnie's life to act out. However, they will need to be a little more creative than usual for this particular scene development, as no one is allowed to play the role of Johnnie. The pig himself must be imagined. The characters can react to him as if he is there, talk about him and interact with him. However no one can play him.

The four episodes to cover are as follows:

- ▶ Group 1: Johnnie's arrival at the house, in the milkman's pocket, and the family's first reaction to him
- ▶ Group 2: Johnnie is taken to meet Lady March (Chapter 6)
- ▶ Group 3: Johnnie visits the fair (Chapter 8)
- ▶ Group 4: Johnnie meets Mac, and George begins to pay more attention to Johnnie than usual (Chapter 9).

Performing the scenes (15 mins)

Allow each group to perform their scene in front of the rest of the class. The scenes should be performed in chronological order, so that they really are a representation of the story of the Peppermint Pig.

Plenary (10 mins)

Bring this lesson, and indeed this Scheme of Work, to a close by asking students to reflect on the book as whole. Many things happen in this story, so why do students think Nina Bawden chose to entitle it *The Peppermint Pig*? How is Johnnie's story intertwined with Poll's? What do students think Nina Bawden is trying to convey through this tale of a tiny pig, who becomes a family pet, and is finally sent to the butcher's?

Extension exercises

A few additional ideas for exploration include:

- ▶ Consider the opening lines of the novel. They are strong, dramatic, and immediately catch our interest. Can students have a go at writing their own opening lines to a novel? Read them aloud to the rest of the class and take a vote on which book students would continue reading.
- ▶ Challenge students to take a position with which they completely disagree in a debate. How can they use persuasive language to argue their case, even though their heart is not in it?
- ▶ Write about the end of Johnnie's life from George's perspective
- ▶ Create a series of tableaux to show what has happened to Father during this year in which he has been in America.