

The Silver Sword by Ian Serrailler: A look at the book through drama

Helen Day

KS2

KS2

Introduction

A classic for over sixty years, *The Silver Sword* presents the harsh reality of wartime life for a Polish family. KS2 students will be gripped by the adventures, setbacks and triumphs of the Balicki children as they make their way across war-torn Europe in search of their parents, and there are plenty of colourful characters and situations to inspire drama work in the classroom.

This scheme of work mainly focuses on the journey of the children, using key moments from the book, as well as challenging students to imagine beyond the text into the thoughts and feelings of the characters. It has been written with the drama objectives of the KS2 National Curriculum in mind, with particular emphasis on spoken language skills, and the adoption, creation and sustaining of roles. Some written work is included, and through improvisation and devising exercises, students will be encouraged to work together and share ideas.

The scheme has been written in chronological order, so could accompany a classroom reading of the book.

Learning objectives

By the end of this scheme, students will:

- ▶ Have used a range of dramatic techniques to explore *The Silver Sword*
- ▶ Have experience of creating and sustaining roles
- ▶ Have explored characterisation through vocal tone, writing in role, body language and facial expression
- ▶ Have participated in group discussion, both in small groups and as a whole class
- ▶ Have experience of working to produce tableaux and short scenes
- ▶ Have developed their spoken language and written skills
- ▶ Have experience of presenting their work in front of their peers.

Lesson 1: Survival

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson students will:

- ▶ Have developed their listening and response skills, responding physically to an extract of text
- ▶ Have participated in group discussion
- ▶ Have worked in small groups to create tableaux, and have experience of presenting these tableaux alongside their peers
- ▶ Have experience of working in a small group to devise and rehearse a scene for presentation.

It is important that students are familiar with *The Silver Sword* to the end of Chapter 7 for this lesson.

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

Ask everyone to stand in a circle. One by one, you are going to ask them, 'What are you doing?' When you do so, each student should respond by saying something that they think a child might have had to do to survive on the streets of Warsaw during the war. They should also mime the activity, and everyone else copies their mime.

Go around the whole circle, and see how many interesting ideas students can come up with.

Listening with improvisation (10 mins)

Read the first two paragraphs of Chapter 1 aloud, twice.

The first time, invite students to listen with their eyes closed, picturing the people and situations that the author describes.

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The second time, invite students to respond physically to the text as you read it. Read it slowly, to allow them time to take on poses or to interact with each other. Whether they decide to work alone or in groups, through frozen or moving images, students should avoid making any sound. The focus of the exercise is on listening and responding precisely to the words that they hear.

Group discussion (5 mins)

Ask for students' thoughts on how effective the opening of the book is. Does it make them want to read more? Based just on what they heard here, could they tell what sort of story this might be? If so, how?

Tableaux exercise: The escape over the rooftops (10 mins preparation)

Divide the class into groups of three.

Each group should create a series of three tableaux, telling the story of how the Balicki children escaped across the rooftops.

Remind students that they will not be able to explore every detail through their three tableaux, so they just need to pick three moments that they feel are important and interesting.

Encourage students to try to express the feelings of the characters they are playing in this exercise, using their full range of facial expressions and body language.

Present the tableaux (10 mins)

Rather than arranging to watch each group perform their tableaux one by one, which would take up too much lesson time, set up a situation in which all the groups perform together.

Settle students by readying them to go into 'performance mode'. Each group should stand together, still, with neutral body language. When you clap your hands they form their first tableau.

Take a moment to look at and observe the tableaux, picking out and mentioning any groups that have done particularly well, before clapping your hands again to move on to the second tableau, and so on.

Scene creation: Edek's arrest (15 mins)

Read aloud the paragraph from Chapter 7 that begins 'There came a morning' and which ends 'with the house owner as well'.

Divide students into groups of 4 - 6, and challenge them to create the scene in which Edek is arrested. The author tells the story in just a few sentences. Can they expand on this to create a stand-alone scene?

Watching the scenes: Spotlight (10 mins)

Watch extracts from the groups' scenes using the 'spotlight' technique.

All the groups should find a space in the room, and prepare to begin playing their scenes. Everyone starts together, but when you move and stand next to a particular group, everyone else should freeze, while only that group continues performing. After a few moments, you can move away and everyone picks up their scene from where they left off. Repeat by standing next to another group, and so on until each group has had a moment in the 'spotlight' and students have finished playing their scenes.

Plenary (5 mins)

Bring the lesson to a close by asking students to reflect on whether they think they could be resourceful and resilient, in the way that the children in the book are. How do they think they would cope in the same situation?

Lesson 2: Meeting Jan, and the journey begins

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson students will:

- ▶ Have developed listening skills through the 'Treasure Box' game
- ▶ Have experience of responding creatively to an extract of text
- ▶ Have developed their character creation skills through considering inner thoughts (thought tapping)
- ▶ Have experience of 'hot seating', offering insight into the characters in the book, as well as how to sustain a role
- ▶ Have experience of writing in role.

It is important that students are familiar with *The Silver Sword* to at least the end of Chapter 12 for this lesson.

A tendency during this type of exercise is for groups to get hung up on planning and casting, rather than making quick decisions and being able to get on with rehearsing.

Avoid this by keeping a firm eye on the clock, and reminding students where they should be as the minutes tick by. After five minutes, they should be up on their feet and rehearsing the scene, after ten they should be able to practice the scene again, etc.

Warm-up game: Treasure Box (10 mins)

This is a memory game to get students focused and thinking about *The Silver Sword*.

You start the game by saying 'I've got a treasure box, and inside it I am keeping a silver sword'.

Next, pick a student to repeat what you have said, and to add something else to keep in the treasure box. The next student repeats the sentence, adding something of their own to the growing list of items that are kept in the treasure box.

Keep going until everyone has had a chance to add something to the box. The game becomes more fun as the list gets longer, much harder to remember, and sometimes students may need the help of their classmates to remember the entire list.

Listening, tableaux and thought-tapping (20 mins)

In this three-part exercise, students are required to listen to a piece of text, respond imaginatively to it in tableau, and then to consider the inner thoughts of the characters in the tableau.

Read aloud the short extracts of text below. After you have read each one, invite students to enter the playing space and to set up a tableau based on what they have just heard. They will do this without discussion. There will be a limit to the number of students who can play in the tableau each time, so they should take it in turns to be in it, to be the audience, or to be involved in the next step – the 'thought tapping'.

Once the tableau is formed, invite one student to stand behind each person playing a character in the scene. One by one, they should gently touch the head of the character they are shadowing, and speak the thoughts that they believe the character might be thinking at that moment.

'Suddenly Bronia, who was very proud because she had never been dead yet, came running down to Ruth in the cellar.

"There's a boy lying down outside and he won't get up," she cried.

"Tickle his ribs," said Ruth.

"I don't think he can get up," said Bronia.' (Chapter 8)

Ruth was going to fetch it herself, when the cock appeared suddenly in the hole in the wall, squawked, flapped its dusty wings, and jumped down beside the boy.

"Jimpy, Jimpy!" said the boy, and he reached out his arms towards the mangy creature.' (Chapter 8)

"You shall have the seat of honour, Ivan," said Ruth. And she gave him a box to sit on. Ivan sat down – and got up rather quickly, rubbing his seat.

"Two inches of rusty nail! That's not the sort of honour I appreciate," he said.

"Did nobody ever teach you how to use a hammer?" (Chapter 9)

'As Jan clutched the broken pieces to his chest, something fell to the ground. It was the silver sword that Joseph had given him more than two years before.

Ruth picked it up and looked at it very closely. It was vaguely familiar – that dragon on the brass hilt – where had she seen it before? Then suddenly she recognized it as the birthday present her father had given her mother the last year before the war. Then she, too, began sobbing.' (Chapter 9)

Listening (5 mins)

Read aloud the section from Chapter 11 that starts *"Which is the way to Posen?" said Ruth*, and which ends *'Very few of the refugees had shoes'*. This section will be used as the source material for the next exercise.

Hot seating: Ruth, Bronia and Jan on the road to Posen (20 mins)

Place three seats in a row in the performance space – these will be the 'hot seats'.

Invite one student to sit in each 'hot seat'; they will be Ruth, Bronia and Jan.

The rest of the students are now able to ask questions to the characters, as if they are meeting them at this point in the book. They can ask questions about what they think the journey will be like, what they expect the outcome to be, what they hope and fear for, etc. The three students in the hot seats should try to answer using the voice, words and thoughts of the character they are playing.

Once a few questions have been asked, allow three more students to have a go in the hot seats. You may only have time for three or four trios, however asking creative and insightful questions is just as important a part of this exercise as playing one of the characters. Hot seating is also used as the final exercise in this scheme of work, therefore there will be further opportunities for students to participate later.

A diary entry (20 mins)

Remind students about the episode at the end of Chapter 12, in which, Ruth and Edek are reunited:

'There had been children on top and all round her, and someone's foot had been on her hair so that she could not turn her head. She had reached blindly for the foot and caught only a hand. For some reason or other she clung on to the hand, and when everyone about her had got up and her hair was free she had not let go. Then she looked to see whose hand it was, and it was Edek's.' Invite students to write a diary entry for Ruth or Edek, the evening after this happened. Can students fill in the gaps, and write about what Ruth or Edek thought and did in the minutes and hours following finding each other's hands in the scrum?

A diary writing checklist is included in the resources that accompany this scheme of work.

Lesson 3: Stop thief! (and deadly enemies)**Learning objectives**

By the end of this lesson students will:

- ▶ Have developed their mime and imagination skills through the warm-up game
- ▶ Have experience of group discussion
- ▶ Have considered how to form an argument, including the use of persuasive language and accompanying vocal tone
- ▶ Have experience of improvising in pairs, further developing their character creation and spoken language skills
- ▶ Have experience of script writing, working in pairs.

It is important that students are familiar with *The Silver Sword* to at least the end of Chapter 20 for this lesson.

Warm-up game: Imaginary Treasure Box (10 mins)

Pass an imaginary treasure box around the room.

When you clap your hands, the student holding the imaginary box should pretend to open it and take something out, showing what it is by the way in which they handle it. Can other students guess what it is? Continue, allowing a few different students to have a go at taking something from the box.

Classroom debate: How forgivable is Jan's stealing? (25 mins)

'As he reflected on the punishment he had given the boy, he realised that for all his noble intentions he had only been scratching on the surface of a problem he could not begin to solve. A week's detention would not prevent Jan from stealing again. Could Ruth prevent him? She was a remarkable girl and, if anybody could help him, it was she. But after five years of war and twisted living, such cases were too often beyond remedy.' (Chapter 18)

In the book, Captain Greenwood gives Jan a light sentence 'under the circumstances'.

Begin this exercise with a classroom discussion. What are the 'circumstances'? Why is it that Captain Greenwood chooses to deal with Jan lightly?

Next, divide the class into (roughly) six groups. Allocate two groups to create an argument for each of the following:

- ▶ Jan should be entirely forgiven and not punished for stealing at all
- ▶ Jan should be given a lenient sentence, as he is in the book
- ▶ Jan should be given a much harsher sentence to teach him that stealing is wrong.

Give the groups a few minutes to discuss and agree on how they will argue their case. Each group might like to nominate a scribe to note down their ideas.

Next, ask each group to nominate a speaker. The speaker will present their case to the rest of the class, and do their best to persuade everyone to agree with their point of view.

After all the groups have presented, take a class-wide vote. Based on what they have now heard, which argument do students believe is right?

Allow a few minutes for a classroom discussion: did students change their minds, and if so, why?

Remind students that this exercise is not just about *what* they say, but *how* they say it. What language can they choose, in order to be the most persuasive? How can a speaker's tone of voice and body language make a difference to how their argument is perceived?

Classroom discussion (10 mins)

'Jan looked at Frau Wolff, quietly intent on her knitting; then at the farmer, whose eyes had a gleam of sadness he had not seen before; then back at the photo. That there could be any connection between these homely folk and the soldier in the photo was beyond his understanding.

After a moment he turned to the farmer and said, "You and I ought to be deadly enemies." (Chapter 20)

Ask students to reflect on this extract. What is the author telling us? Challenge students to think of other examples in which socially, two sides ought to be enemies, but when they meet they might find that they are not.

Pair improvisations (10 mins)

Ask students to get into pairs. Each pair will now improvise a scene in which two characters encounter each other as sworn enemies, but in which they discover common ground and that their hatred was perhaps unnecessary.

For this exercise, students need not stick to the World War II theme. They can of course explore that if they like, but their characters can be from any time and place.

Scripting the scenes (15 mins)

Having improvised a scene, challenge students to try to commit that scene to paper. They will still work in their pairs, so must discuss and agree on the exact words and language that they want to use.

A script template accompanies this Scheme of Work.

Plenary (5 mins)

Throughout the book there are several examples of unexpected help coming to the four protagonists. What do students think the author might be trying to say about the nature of people versus the nature of war?

Lesson 4: Reunited, and life goes on

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson students will:

- ▶ Have developed their quick-fire improvisation skills through 'This is the Family'
- ▶ Have given focused consideration to character construction through the 'Role on the Wall' exercise
- ▶ Have further experience of writing in role
- ▶ Have gained further insight into the characters through the 'hot seating' exercise, which also develops spoken language skills.

It is important that students are familiar with The Silver Sword to the end of the book for this lesson.

Warm-up game: This is the Family (10 mins)

Divide students into groups of four. Ask the groups to cast themselves as Ruth, Bronia, Edek and Jan.

Explain to them that they are going to take on the roles of the four children, quickly arranging themselves into a tableau each time you call out a situation for them to be in.

After you call out each of the following, the groups have ten seconds to arrange themselves into a tableau, before you move on to the next description. In each tableau, they should try not just to express what their individual character is doing and feeling, but also what their relationship to the other three characters is.

- ▶ This is the family hiding from soldiers in a farmhouse
- ▶ This is the family looking after Edek when he is ill
- ▶ This is the family trying to find food when they are hungry
- ▶ This is the family one dark night when it is very cold and they have to sleep outside
- ▶ This is the family when Ruth is cross with Jan
- ▶ This is the family when they have been walking for a long time.

Role on the Wall (15 mins)

Divide the class into small groups. Around five students per group should work well. Give each group a large sheet of paper and a marker pen.

One student from each group should lie on the paper, and the others should draw around their body to give an outline.

Resources needed

- ▶ A large roll of paper from which strips can be used for the *Role on the Wall* exercise
- ▶ Marker pens.

Explain to students that they are going to investigate one of the four key characters from the book – Ruth, Edek, Bronia or Jan. Allocate a character to each group. They should consider the character at the point at which they arrive at the camp (Chapter 26).

The groups should write the name of their character on their paper, alongside the body outline. *Outside* of the outline, they should now begin to write the *facts* that they know about the character. Who are they? Where are they from? How old are they, etc?

Next, *inside* the outline, they should write the thoughts and feelings that the character has. What do they hope for? What are they worried about? Students should write these thoughts in the first person.

Role on the Wall review (5 mins)

Take a few minutes to review students' work. Have any of the groups come up with any particularly interesting ideas about the characters?

Writing in role (20 mins)

'The other letter, from her father, bore a January date. In it he described the children and their circumstances up to the time when he had last seen them. He also referred to his escape from Zakyna, his unsuccessful attempt to find his family, the meeting with Jan and how he had given him the sword, and his long journey to Switzerland. And now the miracle had worked.'

Students are going to imagine that they are Joseph Balicki, and write the above letter, in role, looking for his children.

Give students a few minutes to discuss as a group the kind of things that they might like to include in their individual letters. What tone will the letter take? Will it be serious, sad, pleading, etc? What words might Joseph choose to persuade his reader to help him?

A letter template is included in the resources that accompany this scheme of work.

Reading aloud (10 mins)

Offer a few students the chance to read an extract of their letter aloud to the rest of the class.

Hot seating: All grown up (20 mins)

Repeat the hot seating exercise from Lesson 2, using one chair each for Ruth, Edek, Bronia and Jan. Have one student sit in each chair. They are going to be asked questions in role; however, this time we will imagine that it is ten years after the end of the war. How have their lives changed since the dramatic journey depicted in the book? What are they doing now? What memories do they have of the war, and how much have they faded?

To get everyone on the same page at the start of this exercise, you may wish to remind students of the facts we know from the last chapter:

- ▶ Bronia settled quickest into her new life, and loved art.
- ▶ Edek was very ill for some time but finally recovered and went to Zurich to study engineering.
- ▶ Jan finally grew out of his wild ways, was deeply bonded to Ruth, and had a gift for dealing with animals.
- ▶ Ruth qualified as a teacher, got married, and came back to the village to be a house parent alongside her husband. She had children of her own.

Plenary (10 mins)

Bring this lesson, and indeed this scheme of work, to a close, by asking students to reflect as a group on the book overall, and the impression it has made upon them. Which sections of the book did they enjoy most? Which character do they most empathise with, and why? If they were thrown into the same circumstances as the Balicki children were, do they think they could survive?

Extension exercise

Emphasise the reality of *The Silver Sword* by engaging students in the following imaginative work:

- ▶ Research news stories about refugee children today. Can students recreate scenes from *The Silver Sword*, setting them in the present day and using real-life examples of suffering and survival?

Encourage students to use inspiration from the Role on the Wall exercise when writing their letters. How might Joseph Balicki describe his children? How much does he think they may have changed in the time he has not seen them?

RESOURCES

Resource 1: Diary writing checklist

- ▶ Have you included the date at the beginning?
- ▶ Have you written in the first person?
- ▶ Have you described the important events of the day?
- ▶ Have you written the events in chronological order?
- ▶ Have you included adjectives to describe feelings and emotions?
- ▶ Have you included time connectives?
- ▶ Have you written informally, and mainly in the past tense?

Resource 2: Script Template

Where is your scene set?

What are the two characters doing at the start of the scene?

Write stage directions within the brackets, and speech below

A: ()

B: ()

A: ()

B: ()

A: ()

B: ()

A: ()

B: ()

A: ()

B: ()

How does the scene end?

Resource 3: Letter template

A letter template with a grey border. The page contains several horizontal lines for writing. There are two lines on the right side, two lines on the left side, and a large central area with 18 horizontal lines. At the bottom right, there are two more lines.