

Doctor in the House

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Overview

A family is thrown into turmoil when the father, a doctor, makes a mistake that leads to a baby's death. This sensitive account of a tragic event is likely to generate a huge amount of discussion, so allow for this in your planning. Be aware of any students in your class who may have experienced family losses or tragedies before using this text with them.

Suggested Teaching Purpose

Based on the information I have about my students' learning needs, what would be an appropriate teaching purpose for this session?

Examples of an appropriate teaching purpose are listed below.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">To support the students in developing the comprehension strategies of making connections, evaluating, inferring, and analysing and synthesising. |
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Features of the Text to Consider in Context

What features of this text would support the teaching purpose?

<ul style="list-style-type: none">The blurb on the contents page, which repeats the opening sentence of the story
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The themes of loss, grief, and guilt
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The idea that anyone can make a mistake that has devastating consequences
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The different layers of the story, especially the Anna Simons story, which shows the “ripple” effect of a tragic event
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The double meaning of the title “Doctor in the House”
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The shocking start (“The day Dad got the blame for killing a baby ...”) and the link back to the opening sentence at the end
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The ways the author conveys an atmosphere of loss and grief, for example, her use of:<ul style="list-style-type: none">- the viewpoint of a first-person narrator- detailed observations (the clock chiming four, Dad tracing the woodgrain with his finger, the woman putting the toy rabbit on the coffin)- repetition (“I bawled for the baby. I bawled for Dad. Finally, I bawled for all of us”)- vivid similes (“swallowing like his tonsils were swollen”, “like wading through hair gel”, “like a startled possum”)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The emotive and symbolic illustrations, for example, the clouds hanging over the house at the beginning of the story and the sun shining at the end
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The honesty and frankness of the narrator, for example, “death isn’t exactly an alien concept”
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The expression “it would kill him”
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The role of the media in the event
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The medical and legal terms.

Readability

Noun frequency level: 10–12 years for guided reading

What other features of this text might constitute challenges for my students? (For example, features that may require a prompt or a brief explanation.)

- The medical terms, legal terms, and other unfamiliar words and concepts, including “slouching”, “tonsils”, “alien concept”, “anaesthetic”, “woodgrain”, “suspended”, “investigation”, “the grapevine had been working overtime”, “dry-retched”, “bawled”, “camellia”, “arthritis”, “professional misconduct”, “medical trial”, “struck off”, “barbecuing”, “predictions”, “theatre” (operating theatre), “hearing”, “tribunal”, “beckoned”
- Depending on the students, the emotional intensity of the text.

What prior knowledge would support my students in reading this text?

- Their experiences of loss, grief, and guilt
- Their experiences of family trauma
- Their awareness of ethical dilemmas
- Their familiarity with medical dramas on television
- Their experiences of evaluating ideas and information.

Sharing the learning outcome and success criteria with your students

Learning outcome

I am learning to think deeply about my responses to the events and ideas in this text and to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of this text.

Success criteria

I will be successful when I have:

- made connections with my own experiences to help me imagine what it would feel like to be in such a situation;
- read between the lines to help me understand what the author is trying to convey about the characters’ feelings;
- thought about how the writing affects my response;
- discussed my ideas with others, using evidence from the text.

A Framework for the Lesson

How will I help my students to achieve the learning outcome?

Before reading

- Tell the students you have a story for them to read about the impact of tragic events on people’s lives. “As you read, imagine the scene and how you’d feel if you were these characters. Consider the points of view in the text and what your point of view might be.” (Making connections; visualising)
- Share the learning outcome and success criteria with the students.

During reading

- Have the students read page 18 and discuss how the author sets the scene. Consider the impact of the first sentence. “How might something like this change their lives? How does the narrator know Dad is upset? Why is he so upset?” (Inferring; analysing and synthesising; making connections)
- Have the students read the first paragraph of page 19. Discuss the meaning of “alien concept” and what the students think of the narrator’s view of death. (Building vocabulary; evaluating)
- Ask the students to continue with page 19, visualising the scene as they read. This page will almost certainly generate a lot of discussion. Draw out the idea that not only does Dad feel terrible about the baby dying as a result of his mistake but that he could also lose his job. “What is the role of friends and family in this sort of situation? Why is a lawyer involved?” (Visualising; inferring; evaluating)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have the students read page 20. Clarify any unknown words or phrases, including “the grapevine had been working overtime”. Establish the link between this phrase and the fact that people, especially the media, want to know about the event. “Who has been affected by this death?” Draw out the idea that the tragedy has affected many people. (Inferring; building vocabulary)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Why is it a relief for the narrator to go to school?” Discuss how the writer conveys the narrator’s feelings, including the images of wading through hair gel and Anna’s eyes sliding away. (Visualising; analysing and synthesising; inferring)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage the students to discuss Mum and Dad’s decision to keep the narrator away from the news. “Why do you think they did this?” Do you agree? Why or why not?” Draw out the idea that seeing the funeral on the news brings home the reality of the “other side” of the situation for the narrator — seeing the baby as a person with a name, a face, a coffin — and a grieving family. “I wonder what effect this will have on the narrator ...” (Evaluating; forming hypotheses)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have the students read page 21 and the first paragraph of page 22 and review their prediction about the effect on the narrator. Refer back to your discussion about how the death has affected many people. Discuss the behaviour of the reporters and photographer. “Are they just doing their job? Does the public have a right to know about events like this?” You could discuss the newspaper headline on page 21. (Testing hypotheses; evaluating)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You could also discuss why the narrator and Dad joke about the dog, drawing out the idea of how humour can relieve tension. (Analysing and synthesising)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have the students read the second paragraph of page 22. Clarify any technical vocabulary as necessary. “What does the writer mean by ‘I knew it would kill him’?” Discuss what should happen to Dad. “If Dad couldn’t work as a doctor any more, would this be a waste of his skills? If he could continue as a doctor, how would you feel about him treating someone in your family?” (Inferring; evaluating; making connections)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have the students read the rest of page 22. Clarify the difference between being charged and being found guilty (or not guilty). Discuss the lawyer’s comments about the hospital being to blame. “Do you agree? Why or why not?” (Evaluating)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask the students to read to the end. Note how the last sentence recalls the first one. Discuss what “a bit of my dad died” might refer to, drawing out the idea that everyone in the story has lost something. “Has anything positive come out of this?” Briefly discuss the hospital review and how this might prevent the same thing from happening in future. (Inferring; evaluating)

After reading

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have the students share their responses to the story. “Did your feelings or ideas change while we were reading and discussing it? If so, in what way?” If no one has mentioned it, you could ask the students to consider what the outcome might have been if the baby hadn’t had the operation. (Evaluating)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage your students to identify how the text (aside from the subject matter itself) has made them feel the way they do about the story. Explore in detail the author’s writing style, especially how she conveys an atmosphere of loss and grief. You could focus on such aspects as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - telling the story from the viewpoint of the daughter - the detailed observations on page 18 and (about the coffin) on pages 20–21 that focus attention - the climactic paragraph about bawling on page 21, with its short sentences and use of repetition - the similes on pages 18, 20, and 21 that prompt the reader to clearly visualise the situation - the episodes of humour on pages 21 and 22 (about Skoota and getting “knocked off”), which release the tension when the emotion gets really intense. <p>(Analysing and synthesising)</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Why do you think the author included the Anna Simons story?” Draw out the idea that it personalises the narrator’s experience, shows the “ripple” effect of the tragedy, and suggests the difficulties of conflicting loyalties. (Identifying the author’s purpose; evaluating)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss whether the fact that a person does something terrible makes them a terrible person. “What sort of person do you think Dad is?” Review the text and look for evidence in what he says and how he behaves. Note especially how he isn’t “pleased” but “relieved” at the end. Draw out the idea that Dad will probably always feel guilty. You could link this to the idea of a driver accidentally killing someone in a car accident. (Analysing and synthesising; making connections; evaluating)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the newspaper headline on page 21 and the ideas it conveys about the baby’s death. Discuss how headlines are designed to attract attention and how they often present a particular point of view. “What else could this headline have said?” (Evaluating)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write the words “blub” and “bawl” on the board and discuss their meanings. “Why has the author chosen to use ‘bawled’ rather than ‘blubbed’ on page 21?” You could list other words that mean “cry” and have the students arrange them on a continuum according to their level of emotional intensity. (Analysing and synthesising; building vocabulary)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the learning outcome and success criteria and reflect with the students on how well the learning outcome has been achieved. For example, how has reading between the lines helped you to get a better understanding of the different points of view? “Did your thinking change while you were reading this text? What have you learnt about how a writer can affect the response of a reader?” Note any teaching points for future sessions.

Links to Further Learning

What follow-up tasks will help my students to consolidate and/or extend their new learning?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The students could sketch the characters and create thought bubbles showing the effects of the tragedy on some of the characters, for example, the narrator, Mum, Dad, Anna, the newspaper reporter on page 21, and the baby’s parents. (Analysing and synthesising; evaluating)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold a class debate on one of the ethical dilemmas in the text. (Evaluating)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your students could read “No Joke” in <i>SJ</i> 4.3.00 and discuss its emotional impact and social and moral issues. (Making connections; evaluating)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have your students compose a newspaper headline (and possibly an article) to show the outcome of Dad’s trial. Explore the differences between examples like “Hospital Takes Responsibility” and “Baby Killer Walks Free”. (Making connections; evaluating)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask your students to look out for examples of sensational headlines and explore the way they represent an event. (Evaluating)

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