

The Animals' War

English KS5: Lesson 1

Birdsong



Key to symbols:



Teachers' Notes



Action Resource



Reading Resource

English The Animals' War

KS5 Lesson 1: *Birdsong*



Lesson Plan Duration: one hour

■ Context of Lesson/Key Ideas:

- The centenary of the First World War is an ideal opportunity to look at the role of animals during this time. This lesson will focus on the role of the canary in an extract from *Birdsong* by Sebastian Faulks.

■ Aims and Objectives:

- To understand the role that canaries played in aspects of WWI.
- To analyse the use of the canary in the extract from *Birdsong*, focusing in particular on its role as a talisman and how it acts as a symbol for survival.

■ Resources:

- Passage from *Birdsong* concerning canaries in the mines (pages 299-307)*
 - Resource sheet 1: Canaries and mice in WWI
 - Resource sheet 2: Relationships – canaries and humans
 - Illustrations concerning the construction of mine shafts and photos of canaries and tunneling from Powerpoint 5: *Mines and Tunnels**
 - Powerpoint 5: *Mines and Tunnels**
- (* available as download from website)

■ Differentiation:

- Printed copies of resources, if necessary.

■ Learning tasks:

Starter Activity (15 minutes)

- Introduce students to the purpose of the two lessons.
- Distribute the extract from *Birdsong* and allow students time to read and digest the information.
- Distribute Resource sheet 1, which has background information and some guided reading questions and ask students to consider the questions.
- Ask students for their responses to the four questions.



Main/Development (40 minutes)

- Distribute/show resources (pictures and PowerPoint slides), which help to contextualise the role of canaries in WWI. Ask students to empathise with what it would have been like for soldiers and how canaries would have almost acted as a talisman (a lucky charm) for them during a very challenging time.
- Provide students with the following statement: *In Birdsong, the canary is a symbol for survival.* Ask students to discuss this statement, using the extract to support their views.
- Preparation for a longer piece of writing (lesson two). Students need to re-read the extract, focusing on how the canary links to the behaviour of (and the relationship between) Stephen and Weir. Resource sheet 2 can help with the organisation of ideas.

Plenary (5 minutes)

- Elicit key responses from students, which will link into the second lesson.



Resource sheet 1 Canaries and Mice in WWI

Both sides on the Western Front dug tunnels beneath each other's defences, so that they could explode mines under the enemy's trenches and break through their defences.

The men who dug the tunnels took canaries and mice with them underground to warn them of the presence of dangerous gases such as methane or carbon monoxide. If the mice stopped moving, or the birds stopped chirping or fell unconscious off their perch from a lack of oxygen, the miners were alerted to the danger and would evacuate. Although the animals often recovered consciousness, many died underground.

Questions to think about and answer when reading the extract:

1. What do you understand about the way the canary is described in the extract?
2. As you will know, canaries played an important role for soldiers in WWI. By referring to the extract, explain the positive role canaries had at the time.
3. On page 301, Faulks writes, 'The bird was chirping, though whether from fear or happiness he [Weir] could not say. Stephen shuddered at the sound.' Identify any other negative references to the canary in the extract. Explain the contrasting ways Faulks writes about the canary.
4. What did Weir mean by 'It's a tiny bird. It's done nothing wrong'? What does this suggest about his feelings compared to Stephen's?



Resource sheet 2 Relationships: Canaries and Humans

The purpose of this resource is to help you prepare for a longer piece of writing. You need to find examples of where the canary is linked in some way to the characters of Stephen and/or Weir. Then explain what this says about their relationship. An example is provided to help get you started.

| Example from the text | What this says about characters/their relationship |
|---|--|
| Weir spat through the pain. 'You cannot under any circumstances leave a bird free. Ever. It's in the handbook. I'd be court-martialled. Find the bird.' | Weir is particularly stressed which is shown through the verb 'spat', suggesting how angry he is with Stephen's indifference. The way Weir speaks to Stephen shows how a very challenging situation has been made worse by the men not thinking in the same way. |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |