Weeks 1 and 2 My Polish Teacher's Tie

My Polish Teacher's Tie is a fairly short and accessible story. It could easily be read in a session or for homework.

Student Activity Sheet 1A begins with a short discussion about titles – a useful way of gaining an overview. Students need to consider the sometimes contradictory dual function of both **intriguing** and puzzling the reader, while also **informing** them about content. For example, the title, *My Polish Teacher's Tie*, is quite striking. It sets in place an enigma, which can only be solved by reading the story. It tells us a little about the content, because Steve is a teacher and he is Polish. It also introduces the idea that the tie might be of some importance, symbolically or otherwise. Students might also comment on the use of the word 'my' which could foreshadow some sort of close connection between Carla and Steve. Students are then given an opportunity to consider the effect of the first

Students are then given an opportunity to consider the effect of the first person narrative. This activity can be adapted for use with other first person narratives in the anthology.

Advantages: We are more likely to empathise with the narrator as we see the events and actions of other characters through their eyes. Their actual words may give us a strong sense of their personality. If they say things to us that they may not say to other characters, this can also create a greater sense of intimacy.

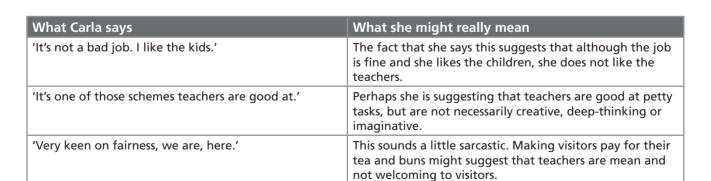
Disadvantages: We only see what they can see, meaning that we can have no knowledge of events when they were not present or of the innermost thoughts of other characters. The first person influences informal sentence construction here, because it is used to recreate the conversational tone of Carla's voice. For example, the use of incomplete sentences in order to be dismissive of herself ('Part time catering staff, that's me, £3.89 per hour'), or the use of repetition to indicate her excitement when she hears the Polish song ('I knew it. I knew it. I knew the words and the tune.'). Colloquial language reinforces this informality: 'Sod it'; 'It seemed a shame to bin it'; 'kids chucking chips again'. She is talking to us as she would do to a friend. It suggests an ordinary person, someone with whom we can identify.

At the start of the story, Carla is a woman with a very limited voice. She is unable to say what she really thinks. **Student Activity Sheet 1B** asks students to read between the lines and suggest what they think she actually means. Some indicative content is given below but teachers should be prepared to accept any plausible alternatives.

For use with Student Activity Sheets 1A–2A

Student Activity Sheet 1A: First impressions

Student Activity Sheet 1B: Reading between the lines







What Carla says	What she might really mean
'I never listen to any of it as a rule'	She could be saying that she feels excluded from the Head's briefing and does not feel part of 'the staff', or she could be saying that, in her view, it is not usually worth listening to.
'Teachers are used to getting out of the way of catering staff without really seeing them.'	She feels that they see her as beneath them: completely unimportant, invisible people to be ignored or avoided.
'He stitched a nice smile on his face and said "Oh, er – Mrs, er – Carter. Is there a problem?"'	He does not really want to talk to her, as he has to 'stitch' on a smile, as if it causes him pain. The use of the filler 'er' suggests he is struggling to remember who she is or is taken aback by her approaching him. His question to her indicates that he does not see her as someone who might want to have a penpal because she is 'only' catering staff.

Student Activity Sheet 1C: Carla's transformation

Student Activity Sheet 1C invites students to discuss the way in which Carla is presented at the start and end of the story.

The beginning

Answers might include:

- She defines herself by her low-paid job and ignores her other achievements such as raising and supporting a daughter. She tells no one that she is half-Polish.
- The uniform seems to accentuate her low status in her own eyes and separates her from the other staff. (Later in the story she says 'colleagues don't wear uniforms.')
- She says she 'shovel[s]' chips. The word 'shovels' suggests she has very little pride in her job. This implies that she has low self-esteem and this makes her seem vulnerable. Instinctively, we sympathise with her.
- It suggests that although she thinks the job and the children are fine, she is not really fulfilled or happy in her work.

The ending

After realising that Steve is uncomfortable, she approaches him, forgetting her self-consciousness. When she sees that he is pleased to meet her and does not care what job she does, she becomes even more confident and positive. She understands that she has the right to talk about poetry, and that her opinions matter. The Head is unimportant as she does not want to 'waste time' on him.

She sees the tie is as 'a flag from another country', one which is 'better'. As a flag is a symbol flown in celebration, to declare territory or to show allegiance or solidarity, perhaps she now understands that her job title does not mean that she is worthless. She can celebrate being who she is, as well as being proud of her Polish identity. She is not afraid to speak or to sing in solidarity with Steve, and does not care what others think.

By using such a strong contrast between the beginning and the end of the story, Dunmore is signalling to us that the change in the level of Carla's self-esteem is enormous – she has now found her voice.

Student Activity Sheet 1D explores the use of symbolism in the story. Two of the most important symbols are the tie and the bird in the poem. Students are given a range of statements about the symbolism of the **tie** and asked to rank them in order, discarding any they think are not relevant and adding any that they think are better explanations. Accept any well-argued viewpoint.

Challenge: Narrative structures.

Quiz: Cloze summary

Student Activity Sheet 1D: Exploring symbolism

They are asked to come up with their own ideas about the **bird in the poem**. The fact that no one could find the bird might suggest Carla's isolation. She is trapped in a low-paid, low-status job. Like the bird, she still expresses herself but not out loud, so, like the bird, no one can hear her. Again, accept any well-argued viewpoint.

Other themes and ideas which students may offer include: true education, represented by Steve as opposed to the teachers who appear to be educators but who demonstrate distorted values; the power of friendship; the value of poetry; the negative effect of stereotyping; appearance versus reality; and the importance of identity. Accept any well-argued viewpoint.

Student Activity Sheet 2A invites students to make notes on the presentation of Steve, an activity that also works as preparation for the sample assessment.

Ideas about what Steve says and does might include:

- His thoughtfulness and sensitivity towards Carla shown by the poetry he writes her.
- His valuing of her opinion: 'If you have no objection, Carla'.
- The fact that he obviously does not care that she is not a teacher he shows genuine pleasure when he meets her.
- He does not care what others think. It is he who starts singing the Polish song in the middle of the staffroom.
- He is used by Dunmore to 'teach' in the wider sense. He teaches Carla and the reader what is truly important in life: care and respect for others.

Ideas about attitudes towards him might include:

- The Head acts as a contrast to Steve. Unlike Steve, he fails to treat Carla with respect. When the Head meets Steve, he is 'wagging a sheaf of papers in front of him and talking very loudly, as if he was deaf'. This raises our sympathy for Steve.
- Similarly, ignorant remarks from the greedy and complaining Valerie Kenward also build up our sympathy for Steve.

Ideas about the imagery used to describe him might include:

- The comparison between Steve and Carla's daughter highlights his youth and vulnerability: 'His face looked much too open, much too alive, as if a child Jade's age had got into an adult's body'. This suggests Carla's desire to protect him. Again, the reader feels sympathy for him.
- 'He looked round at me the way a child does when he doesn't know
 anyone at a party, hoping for rescue': this is a similar image to the point
 above, and supports the idea of his vulnerability and helplessness. The
 word 'rescue' is emotive, suggesting that he is beginning to appear
 desperately out of his depth.
- 'He was tense as a guitar string' suggests his anxiety and again creates sympathy. The image is a musical one but the instrument is silent until the couple break the tension and he begins to sing.

Sample assessment

Write about a character you find interesting in *My Polish Teacher's Tie* and in one other story from *Telling Tales*.

Write about:

- the reasons you find your chosen characters interesting
- the methods the writers use to make your characters interesting.



Student Activity Sheet 2A: The presentation of Steve

Support: Carla's Polish identity.

Challenge: Search for My Tongue – comparative essay.

Quiz: Ten questions



Indicative content

Indicative content contains the sorts of points that a student might include in a typical answer. It is important to be aware that examiners will be encouraged to reward any valid interpretations.

Answers might include some of the following:

A01	 What the chosen character from My Polish Teacher's Tie says, does or feels (probably Carla or Steve) with a focus on 'interesting'. What is 'interesting' about a suitable chosen character from, for example, The Darkness Out There, The Odour of Chrysanthemums, The Invisible Mass of the Back Row or any other suitable story.
AO2	 Carla: first person narrative; contrast between what Carla says and what she means; negative language to express her low self-esteem, language used to describe her transformation; symbolism of the bird. Steve: contrast with the Head and Valerie Kenward; symbolism of the tie; use of imagery to describe him. Presentation of interesting character from any other suitable story.
AO3	 Ideas about characters who challenge social or cultural attitudes. Consideration of what is truly important. Attitudes to class, race and self-esteem. Exploration of surprising or shocking attitudes and behaviours either in a negative or positive sense.

Student Activity Sheet 1A

First impressions

The title

Never underestimate the power of a title! They are often very revealing.

In pairs, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the following titles as appropriate choices for Dunmore's short story.

- How I found my voice again
- My life as a catering assistant
- Poetry and friendship

The title 'My Polish Teacher's Tie' is certainly an unusual one. Think about why the writer might

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	of the first person	<i>1</i> , C ,
at the w	s told in the first person, in other words, in Carla's own voice. (Although do iter is Helen Dunmore, and Carla is a persona that Dunmore has created in ry!) The first step in considering Dunmore's presentation of Carla is to look is revealed and the kind of language she uses.	n order to
-	e the (a) advantages and (b) disadvantages of first person narrative?	
(a)		





	b)	
3	How does the first person technique influence sentence construction ? Give two example rom the story.)S
4	Now find examples of colloquial language in the story. What do you learn about Carla as person from the way she speaks?	а
5	How does this affect the relationship between reader and writer?	

Student Activity Sheet 1B

Reading between the lines

Now we need to consider the actual content of what Carla says.

Carla is someone who struggles to speak and does not always say what she means. Sometimes what she doesn't say is more interesting than what she does say! Fill in the table below to show what you think Carla *really* means in the following statements.

What Carla says	What she might really mean
'It's not a bad job. I like the kids.'	
'It's one of those schemes teachers are	
good at.'	
'Very keen on fairness, we are, here.'	
very keen on failness, we are, fiere.	
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'I never listen to any of it as a rule'	
'Teachers are used to getting out of the way	
of catering staff without really seeing them.'	
'He stitched a nice smile on his face and	
said "Oh, er Mrs, er Carter. Is there a problem?"	





Student Activity Sheet 1C

Carla's transformation

In order to appreciate the change in Carla, we need to look at the beginning and ending of the story.

1 Read the passage below, which is the first paragraph. In groups, discuss what you think it tells us about the level of Carla's self-esteem.

I wear a uniform, blue overall and white cap with the school logo on it. Part time catering staff, that's me. £3.89 per hour. I dish out tea and buns to the teachers twice a day, and I shovel chips on to the kids' trays at dinner-time. It's not a bad job. I like the kids.

Share your views with the rest of the class.

2 Now read the ending of the story:

And then I was singing, stumbling after him all the way to the end of the verse.

'Good heavens. How very remarkable. I didn't realise you were Polish, Mrs ... er ...' said the Head as he bumbled round us flapping his papers.

'Nor did I,' I said. But I wasn't going to waste time on the Head. I wanted to talk about poetry. I smiled at Steve. His red tie with its bold green squiggles was much too wide and bright. It was a flag from another country, a better country than the ones either of us lived in. 'I like your tie,' I said.

In groups discuss the following:

- How has Carla changed by the end of the story?
- Why does she refer to the tie as 'a flag from another country'?

Share your views with the rest of the class.

Student Activity Sheet 1D

Exploring symbolism

Some of the main themes and ideas in the story are expressed through **symbolism**. The tie and the bird in the poem are two important symbols in the story.

The tie

1 Read the following statements and decide which one you feel is the most likely. Then rank the others in descending order of importance. You may discard any that you think are untrue, and add your own in the last row if you wish.

Statement	Order
Dunmore wants us to see Steve as a character who can teach everyone the importance of being happy in our own skins. The bright and 'hopeful' tie symbolises Steve himself – his bravery, individualism and optimism.	
When Carla says she likes his tie it is a sign that outside appearances no longer matter to Carla. The reader is encouraged to think about their own values.	
Dunmore wants us to join Carla in seeing the tie as a flag from a better country. She is suggesting it is a symbol of a better life, in which everyone can be proud of who and what they are. It suggests hope for the future.	
The tie represents the bond between the two of them. The knot in the tie represents a lovers' knot and suggests the strength of their friendship or love	

The bird in the poem

ao you see a	ink between the				
Vhat other th	emes do you se	e as importar	nt in the story?		
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Student Activity Sheet 2A

The presentation of Steve

Steve plays an important role in the story, in that he helps to bring about the change in Carla. Dunmore presents him sympathetically. She clearly wants the reader to like and respect him.

Make notes on how she achieves this. You might consider:

- what Steve says and does
- the attitudes towards him of negative characters such as the Head and Valerie Kenward

ne imagery Carla uses to describe him.					



Sample assessment

Which character do you find most interesting in *My Polish Teacher's Tie* and in one other story from *Telling Tales*.

Write about:

- ▶ the reasons you find your chosen characters interesting
- ▶ the methods the writers use to make your chosen characters interesting.