Names – people and places

Teacher notes

What follows are some ideas for guiding students through a lesson on the significance of names in Carter’s novel with a view to completing an essay on names and naming.

Although useful for other syllabuses, this resource was written with students of ‘AQA specification A: The modern novel’ in mind.

All page references are taken from the Vintage Classics edition, ISBN: 0-09-998110-6

Lesson content

You could begin with a class discussion based on pages 233-4. Try to elicit responses from students based on the following points:

• ‘Dramatis Personae’: this is typically seen at the beginning of a play, and is a list of characters whom the reader will meet within its pages. Here, Carter merges the genres of play and prose to convey the type of work she has written. Students may identify sections of the novel where these genres meet/overlap, which (especially evident in the references to Shakespeare’s plays such as A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Twelfth Night).

• The words are Latin and take the reader back into convention, especially when teamed with: ‘(in order of appearance)’. Students should be asked why Carter first challenges the conventions of prose by having a list of characters, then adheres to convention by putting the characters in order of appearance. They should be guided towards a discussion of the structure of the text and the way it moves in and out of realistic boundaries in the convention of magical realism. It is also an example of Carter imposing a recognisable structure on some very unusual events, albeit a structure from a different genre.

• Carter also challenges existing convention by putting the ‘Dramatis Personae’ at the end of the novel, rather than the beginning. It could be argued that she is using the pantomime convention of ‘He’s behind you!’

• Nora and Dora. These names use internal rhyme to emphasise the fact that they are twins, though, of course, Dora is the narrator and gains importance from the fact that she is five minutes older than her sister. Students can widen the discussion of these names by examining the widespread use of twins in Shakespeare’s plays, and the reasons for their use to confuse identity and further plot lines. The discussion should also be directed towards the further inroads into the prose genre made by this device.

• Chance is the surname shared by Nora, Dora and Grandma. The word means ‘a favourable set of circumstances, an opportunity, events which have no apparent cause, but are unpredictable and accidental’. Students should be encouraged to discuss the importance and appropriateness of this surname for each character.

• Tiffany is associated with Ophelia, creating a link between prose and drama. Tiffany is Tristram’s assistant on his game show, supporting his performance, just as Ophelia plays a supporting role in the subplot of Hamlet. Links between the two characters can be explored in detail.
Names – people and places

- **Hazard** – the word means ‘a potential threat to life, health, property or the environment’. The threat is not necessarily realised, but is always there, ready to cause potential harm. The surname is shared by Melchior, Peregrine, Lady Atalanta, Saskia, Imogen, Tristram, Gareth, and Ranulph. There are more Hazards than Chances in the novel. In Shakespeare’s plays it is sometimes said that the difference between comedies and tragedies is that the potential tragedies are present in his comedy plays, but are not allowed to assert themselves. Students can be encouraged to discuss the humour in *Wise Children* and the potential threat to well-being posed by the large number of Hazards, compared with the smaller number of Chances. Carter allows the Chances to triumph in the end, the reason for which is something the students can debate.

- **Melchior** – the name of one of the Three Kings, the Three Wise Men or Magi. It is a male name of Hebrew origin, meaning ‘a king’. Students may discuss the appropriateness of this name, and whether Carter fits it to Melchior, the character in the novel, Melchior’s character parts in his acting career, or a mixture of both. An interesting discussion can focus on what gifts Melchior brings, and who the other two wise men could be!

- **Peregrine** – a peregrine falcon is a bird of prey with exceptionally good eyesight, and the ability to swoop down swiftly on its prey. The debate about this name may centre upon times when Peregrine may be said to ‘fly’, for example, when Dora has a memory of him putting her and Nora into his pockets and flying them away from their first meeting with Melchior (page 73), his interest in butterflies; the way he ‘flies’ in and out of Nora and Dora’s lives and lives an unstable existence, his ‘flying visits’ to various females for romantic purposes!

- **Tristram and Gareth** – Dora refers to them as twins with ‘bloody silly Celtic names’. Why, then, have these names been chosen for them? What might Carter be hoping to convey with this selection of names?

- A number of characters assume the function of a Chorus in classical Greek drama, and are not given names. This is particularly the case with men who have been involved with either Dora or Nora or both! Examples include: ‘Pantomime Goose’ (whose wife is the Principal Boy!), the Blond tenor with unmemorable name, ‘Mr. Piano Man’, Irish, Unnamed radical German exile in Hollywood. Students can discuss why these characters are not identified by name, and what it tells the reader about romantic relationships enjoyed by Nora and Dora. The question can be widened to a discussion about the importance of relationships in the novel as a whole, and what Carter might be saying about traditional relationships.

- **Genghis Khan** – a Mongolian leader, renowned for his skills in battle, and remembered for uniting tribes in the region. Students can debate Carter’s choice of name for this character and how he uses his skill to produce the ‘masterpiece of kitsch’ which becomes the film version of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. He works with all the strands of the Chance and Hazard families, and the climactic scene in which he is involved is the wedding scene.

Continue the lesson by examining significant places, for example the ones from below. Students may wish to add various theatrical settings to the list.
**Place names**

- The Chances live at: 49, Bard Road, Brixton, London, SW2. This is another naming device which links the novel with Shakespeare’s poetry. It provides an opportunity for students to explore the links between the two genres.
- The address is on ‘the wrong side of the tracks’, ‘the bastard side of Old Father Thames’. The description creates an explicit division between the right side and the wrong side. As the Chances live on the wrong side, with an address linked with Shakespeare, he is clearly on the wrong side too! This should be explored as it contains messages about high and low culture, and the position Shakespeare occupies. Students can be asked whether Shakespeare’s writing is highbrow, or lowbrow (and how it would have been viewed at the time he was writing). They can debate whether Carter has put him in the right place!

**Essay title**

Examine the ways in which Carter uses names to enhance meanings and messages in *Wise Children*.

**Essay planning**

Students should look at all the ways Carter uses names to add layers of meaning to her novel.

**Examples are:**

- genre
- structure
- references to Shakespearean characters
- Hazard
- Chance
- birds
- biblical characters
- Celtic names
- names given to twins
- a Mongolian leader
- anonymous characters!

Students can then be assisted with planning prior to answering the essay question.