

TEXT	THE CUCKOO CLOCK (1877)
AUTHOR	Maria Louisa Molesworth
THEMES	Clothes (unit 2), city life (unit 6)
VOCABULARY	Houses, flats, colours, neighbourhoods
WRITING	Students write a questionnaire.
SPEAKING	Students interview classmates.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Maria Louisa Molesworth (1839–1921) wrote fiction and is most famous for her novels for children. She was in many ways a typical Victorian. To quote the writer and critic Roger Lancelyn Green, she ... *typified late Victorian writing for girls. Aimed at girls too old for fairies and princesses but too young for Austen and the Brontës, books by Molesworth had their share of amusement, but they also had a good deal of moral instruction. The girls reading Molesworth would grow up to be mothers; thus, the books emphasised Victorian notions of duty and self-sacrifice.* Molesworth strikes an effective balance between entertainment and didacticism in her stories. In *The Cuckoo Clock*, the magic and fantasy lead to adventures that ultimately teach Griselda to be responsible and behave with respect for others. Like several authors of her time, Molesworth was interested in the occult and the magical and wove these themes into her books. This tendency has sometimes been interpreted as the late Victorian's desire to find some alternative to traditional religious beliefs which had been undermined by the rise of science and empiricism.

WARMER

Find a picture of an old house in a town, even better if it has a garden, a picture of a young girl from a well-off family of the Victorian period, a picture of a cuckoo clock and a picture of a real cuckoo. Use the last pictures to explain the title of the story. Tell students you want them to imagine what the story might be about based on these four pictures. Explain that there are no right or wrong answers and they can create any story they want. Give them about five minutes to create an idea and then share some of the ideas with the whole class.

ABOUT YOU

Use the questions to get students thinking about new and old and big and small houses and apartments. If necessary, elicit things like *'Houses have gardens / they may not have neighbours, flats can be high up / might be noisier – you can find very old houses but very old flats are not as common, unless they are old houses made into flats'*, etc.

Go through the introduction and check that students understand the situation and the term *fantastic* as a type of story where strange and unreal things happen.

- 1 Students read the text or you can read it aloud. Ask students to discuss the question and then ask for comments with the whole class. *Grey, brown* (hair) and *rosy* are mentioned but many others are suggested – green/brown by the trees, red/yellow by the fire. Synesthesia means some readers experience texts with other colours, so some interesting suggestions might be forthcoming.

2

Possible answers

- 1 It's very old, it has a garden like a forest although it's a town house and time seems to stand still there.
- 2 They are *grey*. (You might point out that the writer probably means the name sounds grey – rather dark and serious – although for speakers of Romance languages the name suggests *grey* because *gris/grigio* actually means *grey*.)
- 3 It has a fire burning and the light is cheerful.
- 4 Ask for suggestions – her father or a relative? A family friend? A kind of servant?

VOCABULARY

3

Answers

- 1 An old servant worked in the house.
- 2 Her dress was a pink colour.
- 3 He is a very kind gentleman.
- 4 Four horses pulled the large carriage. / Four large horses pulled the carriage.

4

Answers

- 1 passed away
- 2 servants
- 3 carriage
- 4 drowsy

WRITING

5

Divide the class into an equal number of small groups. Allocate half the groups the topic of 'flat/house' and the other half 'neighbourhood'. Go through the instructions on the student worksheet and clarify the activity. Suggest a minimum number of questions – between six and ten for example. Monitor the writing and help with vocabulary.

MIXED ABILITY

Stronger students can be given alternative, more challenging topics for their questions – public transport, things for young people to do in a neighbourhood, shopping, etc.

SPEAKING

6

Make sure each student has a copy of their group's questions. The activity should be done as a whole-class mingle. Tell students they should interview as many people as they can in fifteen minutes. When they have finished, go back to their groups and compare the answers they were given.

MIXED ABILITY

By repeating the questions several times, the weaker students gain confidence. The questions become a kind of drill, but because students are interacting with others, it has meaning and purpose. Stronger students could be encouraged to develop the questions by asking for more detail or be asked to summarise the responses to their group's questions at the end.