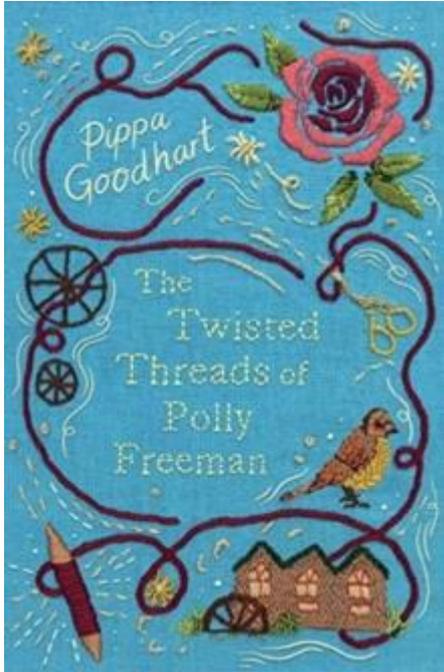


Teaching Resources



The Twisted Threads of Polly Freeman is suitable for teaching to children aged 8+

The following teaching resources help you to explore important themes in the book such as identity, family, friendship, separation, storytelling, freedom, creating beauty, and empathy, as well as the life of Victorian children in workhouses and factories, and touching on the role of slavery in the Industrial Revolution.

The lesson plans below match chapters as we read through the book.

Synopsis:

When Polly and her Great Aunt are caught thieving, they are taken into terrifying huge St Pancras Workhouse. Picking oakum from old ropes, Polly and friend Min plot to run away. But an opportunity to work as an apprentice at a cotton mill looks promising. The reality of life as child workers in mills is grim, though, despite Quarry Bank being one of the kinder employers. And it's hard being the outsider new to the group. Even harder when Min dies in an accident. Polly determines to run back to London and Aunt, but she gets caught. She tries to escape again, this time dressed as a boy. The life or death drama that results from that foils her escape, but it leads to an opportunity for her to work, embroidering, in the Master's

house. And then to the chance to bring Aunt to Quarry Bank. Seething through the story is Polly's need to find out more about who her parents were. Discovering that her father had been a slave comes as a shock, as does the realisation that he might still be alive...

An Historical Afterword at the end of the book explains which parts of the story are based on truth and which made up, putting the story into its historical context.

Pippa Goodhart has written many books for children including the million plus selling **You Choose** picture books, the **Winnie the Witch** storybooks (written under the name of Laura Owen), and a number of historical novels. One, **The Great Sea Dragon Discovery**, set in the 1860s when fossil finds and Darwin were developing ideas about evolution, won the Young Quills Award for the best historical novel for children in 2019, awarded by the Historical Association.

Lesson One : Stealing

Based on Chapter Two, so best used as class reading of the book has just completed sharing that chapter.

Discussion questions:

- Why are Aunt and Polly trying to steal from the rich gentleman?
- Is it ever right to steal?
- What do you feel about Aunt's philosophy that, *'I'd only ever pick the pocket of somebody who can afford to lose a little'*?
- Who punishes people who steal?

Task: Who Stole The Pies?

Take a moment to imagine some freshly cooked pies, thinking of words to describe their smell and taste and appearance and how they might feel if you picked one up, how they might taste if you took a bite.

Imagine a scenario in which a plate of those pies, just baked and set to cool, has disappeared; stolen.

Put children into pairs (the odd threesome is fine). Then one (or two, if in a threesome) choose to be the person who made the pies, and has suffered the burglary. The other one (or two) are the burglar(s).

Use a whistle or equivalent to give strict time limits. Five minutes in which the burglar asks the cook to tell why and how they made the pies. Then five minutes in which the cook asks the burglar why and how they stole them. Each side are to express their feelings, as well as the facts, about what has happened.

Now the children write about the pie burglary from one of those points of view.

Lesson Two : Belongings

Based on Chapter Three

Quote from Chapter Three:

'When a rag and tar soap didn't make Polly as pale as the woman wanted, she scrubbed at Polly with a stiff bristled brush that scoured her skin raw.

'Get off me!' shouted Polly, wriggling away from the brush.

'Thick with dirt, you are!' said Mrs Dale.

'I am not!'

'And that hair will have to come off. Just look how thick it is! Its sure to be lousy. Here, I'll take that flower thing out of it.' She yanked Aunt's red rose from Polly's hair.

'Give it back! That's mine!' It was the only thing of her own that Polly still had, and it had hours of Aunt's love and work in the making of it. Polly jumped to try and snatch the rose out of the Mrs Dale's hand, but Mrs Dale held it aloft, then dropped it onto the floor.

The metal shears were cold, slicing with a chomping noise, cropping Polly's hair so close that she could feel a breeze over her scalp. Polly focussed on the rose on the floor just out of reach as her hair was taken from her.

'Here, you can put this dress on'

The workhouse dress was more shapeless and coarser than her familiar own old brown that looked a poor ragged thing on the floor. The new dress felt wrong. For the first time, Polly felt the heat of tears welling in her eyes, but she blinked them away. *If you're not feeling strong, then just pretend that you are,* is what Aunt would say. *Likely you'll soon find your mood catching up with the pretence.*

There was a white pinafore to go over the dress, and a cap. As Polly bent down to pick the white cap off the floor, she reached over and palmed the red rose into the pinafore's front pocket, and felt a little better. She pulled on the rough cotton cap, grateful that it covered her shorn head, and tied its strings under her chin.

It felt to Polly as if she was dressed to play the part of somebody else. She put a hand into the pinafore pocket and felt the soft petals of the rose. *I am still Polly Freeman*, she thought. *Aunt loves me, and I love her. But I need to play a part and be clever if Aunt and I are to get out of here.*'

Discussion questions:

- What are clothes for? Are they only to keep us warm or dry? Do they show something about the sort of person you are?
- Is a school uniform a good idea? What are the good things about wearing a uniform? What are the bad things? Who else wears a uniform? Why?
- Do you think that Aunt was right when she said that wearing the rose might make Polly feel 'bolder'?
- How does Polly's ordinary clothing help her go about without being noticed much? Does being a child mean that adults tend to take less notice of what you do and what you say?

Task: Possessions

All that Polly has from her former home is that rose. That's why it's so important to her. If you had to suddenly leave home and could choose to take just one of your things with you, what would you choose to take, and why?

Teacher to offer a bag of random small objects – a coin, a peg, hat, photo, tatty book, a lemon, a key, a spoon, an ornament. Make it a lucky dip, children taking out an object.

Now, think about who, as an imagined character, might have that object, where they got it from, and why that object might be very important to them. Discuss some examples. How does the object make that person feel? Might they be able to use it for something in particular (even if just as a comfort or inspiration rather than in a practical way)?

Each write down a list of answers to these questions as if you were that character, imagining that this object was the only thing they still had from their past life.

What is your object?

Where did your object come from?

How does your object feel in your hand?

Describe how it looks.

Does your object have any power?

How do you feel about your object?

Turn those thoughts into a poem. Illustrate it with a picture of your object.

Some might like to read out their poem or show their picture. Others can respond with what they like about it.

Extra:

Poor Polly has to wear a uniform brown dress and pinafore. She has Aunt's red rose, but nothing else of her own.

Imagine you could pack a trunk full of things as a present for Polly.

Draw or list what you would put into a big Victorian trunk for her.

Lesson Three : Lies and Stories

Based on Chapter Five

Discussion questions:

- Who has lied in this story so far? Why have they lied? Do you think that they should have lied?
- Do the real life butterfly wing markings (referenced in Chapter One) which make the butterfly look like a different size of creature count as lies? Are lies usually about survival?
- Can you think of a time when you have lied to get yourself out of trouble?
- Can you think of a time when you have lied to be kind to somebody?

Perhaps the cruellest lie told in this story is what the Parish Officer tells the children in the workhouse about what life will be like as apprentices in the cotton mills...

Quote from Chapter Five:

As they sat at the long tables, waiting for the overseer to shout out thanks to God for the splat of grey food in the bowls in front of them, Polly saw that there was somebody with the usual man with the stick.

‘That’s the parish officer, that is,’ whispered Min. ‘I’ve seen him before.’

The parish officer wore a splendid blue coat with red and gold trimmings. He rocked back on his heels, his thumbs wedged behind the thick leather belt around his plump waist. He tipped back his rather square head, and he bellowed to the room, ‘Your attention please, St Pancras Workhouse inmates! I have an announcement to make.’ He paused, waiting for all eyes to be on him before he continued. ‘An exceptionally excellent opportunity has arisen for some of you here to learn a trade and secure a respectable living.’ A murmur of interest swelled around the room. ‘This does only apply to persons aged between nine and twelve years old.’

‘Us!’ whispered Min.

‘A mill in Nottingham is in need of strong child workers, and is offering apprenticeships.’ The officer looked directly towards the long table where Polly and Min sat with the other oakum picking girls. ‘I’m told,’ said the parish officer, ‘that when you get to this place of work you will find that roast beef is eaten most days. Plum pudding was mentioned too for those who work hard. Rides in your master’s carriage and all sorts of treats and riches could be yours.’ Polly squeezed Min’s thin hand under the table. ‘What is more, those chosen children will be given an education in return for their work. What do you think of that?’

Discussion questions:

- What is the difference between a lie and a story?
- Why do we make up stories, and capture them in books and on film and in songs?
- When you tell a true story about something that really happened to you, do you choose which bits to tell and which bits to leave out in order to make the best story?

Task:

Write about your journey to school today. Start the story where you really began your journey, and end it where it really ended, but use your imagination to invent something exciting that might have happened between the two. Add things to, and take things away from, reality in order to make an extraordinary story of that journey.

Some might like to read out their story to the class. What do people like best about the story they hear?

Extra:

What the Parish Officer promises the children were copied by the author from what a man called Robert Blincoe wrote about his own boyhood experiences when he was seven years old and, like Polly, in St Pancras Workhouse. Can you find more of what he wrote? Where might you look? You might discover more about workhouses too. Was there a workhouse near where you live?

Lesson Four : Choices

Based on Chapter Six

Quote from Chapter Six:

'... leaving Aunt behind made (Polly) ache with sadness. Do you really want me to go, Aunt? thought Polly. Or are you playing a part to make me feel better? Either way, the best way to free Aunt was to make a success of her apprenticeship fast, then come back in triumph to claim her.

'Line up, two by two, smallest at the front, biggest at the back,' ordered Mr Scrivens.

They shuffled to sort themselves. Then the door opened, and Polly pushed forward, clutching Min's sleeve to take her through the doorway with her.

'Oi, no shoving or I'll keep you back!' shouted Mr Scrivens.

But Polly was out.

She was out into sounds of rumbling wheels and clapping horses, shouting people, laughter, and a big, high blue sky above. There was cheering from a small crowd gathered near the workhouse entrance. On the road were two carts with a pair of big horses hitched to each of them. Parish beadle in smart tailcoats with brass buttons stood either side to clear a path leading to the wagons. They stood stiff and straight, holding long sticks. Polly saw that they were sweating in their thick woollen uniforms in the June sunshine. She couldn't quite believe such formality and fuss being made over workhouse children.

Some of the crowd were passers-by, stopping to see what was going on. But others were families of children who were going. They were shouting out names, and waving. Some pushing. Some crying. Polly realised that the beadle's sticks were to keep those people back from the children.

'He's my boy! Mine! Don't you take him from me!'

'Come on,' Min urged Polly, pulling her to the front so they were the first to reach a cart, climbing up on to the clean straw. Perhaps it was better not to have anybody to leave. Apart from Aunt.'

Discussion questions:

- If you were Polly, would you stay with Aunt in the workhouse, or leave to take up the apprenticeship at a mill? Why would you decide that way?
- We make choices all the time. What choices have you already made today? (eg which socks to wear, what to eat for breakfast, where to sit, whether or not to answer this question!)
- What might be the most important choice you ever make in your life? (eg, whether to stay living in this country, who to spend your life with and have children with, whether or not to put yourself in danger in order to save somebody else).

Quote from Chapter Six:

'It took four days and three nights for the carts to get to the mill. By then most of the children had spent their shillings in the towns and villages they'd stopped in on the way, buying such treats as sticks of sour rhubarb with paper twists of sugar to dip them into. Polly

looked longingly at them, but she liked even more the feeling of the shilling still with its spending potential intact in her pocket. *Having money in life gives you choices*, is what Aunt said. Polly wanted choices. Min had never in her life been offered choices. She'd never had even a farthing of her own. Now she spent her shilling on buns and a length of silky blue ribbon that she tied into her hair. She shared the buns with Polly.'

Discussion questions:

- Why does Min choose to buy sweet things to eat and a silky ribbon with her sixpence? (NB She's never had money to spend before).
- Why does Polly choose to save her money?

Task:

Get into pairs (or a threesome with one to question the other two), with one arguing as Min, spending her money on treats, and one arguing as Polly, saving her money for later. Use the 'talking stone' method to ensure they don't talk over each other. Each pair has a stone (or equivalent), and only the person holding the stone can talk. The other must listen. Then the stone is handed over, and the roles reversed.

As a class, discuss the two points of view.

Now allow the whole class vote on the best thing to do with that sixpence, with three options to vote between: 1) spending it, 2) spending thruppence and saving thruppence, and 3) saving it all.

What might you personally like to save up to pay for? Maybe you want some particular thing? Maybe you want to do something that costs money? Maybe you want to buy a surprise present for somebody? Maybe you want to just save that money so that you have it in case of emergencies.

Imagine you were given a thousand pounds (teacher could print out fake £1,000 notes to give to everyone to help the game along). Write a persuasive piece about how you would use that money, and why.

Some might like to read out their work, and others tell what they like best about it.

Extras:

The author of 'The Twisted Threads of Polly Freeman' has written a picture book called 'You Choose'. It's a catalogue of lots of things to choose, illustrated by Nick Sharratt. The children might enjoy sharing that book in pairs or small groups, making their choices from the many things on offer.

Research what a C19th sixpence, a farthing, and other coins, looked like.

Lesson Five: Making Friends

Based on Chapter Ten

When Polly was the new child at the workhouse, Min befriended her. Together they went to Quarry Bank Mill as outsiders. The other children weren't always kind, mocking their accents and clothes, and saying that you couldn't trust people from London. But at least they have each other ... until Min dies. Then Polly has to start again with making friends.

Discussion questions

- Why are friends important?
- Why do you think the other children picked on Polly and Min when they first arrived at the Apprentice House?
- What should Polly do to make friends?
- How could the other children make it easier for the new ones?

Task:

Think of words that describe the things that join friends together (fun, honesty, understanding, kindness, being there). Make a paper chain, writing friendship words on each bit of paper before linking them.

Discussion question:

- Do the chains of a friendship group have to be broken before a new friend can be joined in? You do need to make changes, either adding another link to the end, or breaking and re-joining with the extra chain. But it's a bigger friendship chain as a result!

When Min dies, Polly has to start again with trying to make friends.

Quote from Chapter Ten:

‘As Dr Holland turned to go, he looked back over his shoulder, and added, ‘Make friends with the other children, Polly. We all need friends.’

And Polly thought that, yes, having a friend or two to help her to run away could make the difference between getting caught or not. Aunt used to say, *‘A single thread is a delicate thing, Polly. But twist those threads together and they become stronger than you’d believe possible.’* Polly did believe it possible, having worked threads in the mill and seen how oakum tufts twisted together into ropes strong enough to hold a ship. *I need to twist myself in with the others*, she thought.

Task Two:

Try taking a wisp of cotton wool, and twist it into a fine thread. Then pull ... it breaks easily. Twist two threads, then twist them together. They are harder to pull apart. Twist more threads, twisting those threads together, and cotton wool can become strong. Note how the broken threads can be re-used to become part of the stronger thread.

Polly thinks of friendship as being like a twisting together of threads. What else might you compare friendship to?

Write a poem about friendship.

Share and appreciate some of those poems.

Extra: Make a class list of ways to welcome new people into your group and school.

Lesson Six : Drama!

Start this lesson between reading Chapter Thirteen and Chapter Fourteen.

After reading Chapter Thirteen, ask the class to guess what might happen next.

Now read Chapter Fourteen.

Discussion Questions:

- Did you guess rightly what would happen?
- What might happen next? We're going to pause and think about this scene before moving on and finding out!

Task:

The writer keeps us very much with Polly's experience of what is happening. We know what Polly hears and feels and sees. We know her thoughts, reasoning out what she thinks is happening, and her feelings as things suddenly change.

How do those dripping sounds up the tension that we feel?

We have Polly's literal point of view, looking up the steps to Mr Rudge's face, lit ghoulishly from below by the lantern. Draw what she sees (maybe using charcoal?).

Discussion points:

- What does the author mean when she says that Polly was 'stumbling towards the safety and danger of darkness'? Can both those things be true at once?
- What should Polly do now? Mr Rudge, who she blames for Min's death and who is threatening her now, is in mortal danger, being lifted up on the great wheel. Should she run? Or save him? Discuss.

Task:

Write what you think happens next.

Now read Chapter Fifteen to discover what she actually does happen.

Lesson Seven : Lullaby

Based on Chapter Sixteen

Polly's daddy's song, here (*within a quote from Chapter Ten*):

'You don't notice a brown bird sitting amongst brown leaves until that bird sings,' was something Aunt said. So, as she sat and darned, Polly began to hum very softly. The girls

around her went quiet, listening. Polly opened her mouth and sang properly then, singing the whole of her daddy's song,

'Olele, olele moliba makasi
Olele Mboka na ye, mboka, mboka kasai-i
Mboka na ye mboka na ye, mboka, mboka, kasai-i
Olele, olele moliba makasi
Eeo, eeeee,
Benguela aya
Oya oya, oya oya...
Olele, olele moliba makasi.'

(Quote from Chapter Sixteen, where Mr Smethick tells where he's heard that song before):

'John and I were both wounded badly in the battle, left broken and bleeding, lying on the grass, unable to move. And John began to sing a rather wonderful song. Those eerie sounds of men in great pain around us quietened as he sang, I remember. I'm sure it was that song that soothed us. Sing it again, would you?'

'Olele, olele, moliba makasi,' sang Polly shyly quietly now.

'That's it, I'm sure! John sang that on and around until the sun came up and help arrived. I remember feeling strangely content as he sang that strange lullaby of a song in his rich deep voice. I felt content in spite of knowing that I might well be dying.' He smiled again at Polly. 'I still think the song beautiful. He was a good man, was John Freeman.'

Discussion questions:

- Do you think the song is just sounds, or a language that tells something? Can you think of nursery rhyme or other songs that include words that don't mean anything (Hickory-Dickory-Dock, Hey diddle-diddle, Incy-Wincy spider)?
- Polly's 'Daddy's Song' is an African song to row a boat to. What have rowing and soothing a baby with a lullaby got in common (rhythm)?

Task:

Make a list of soothing words where it isn't just the meaning of the word, but the sounds that sooth (eg the word 'soothing').

Write a poem/song that evokes a feeling of sleepiness.

Test out some poems to see if they send the class to sleep!

Extra: Read Lewis Carroll's poem, 'Jabberwocky', written in 1872, to enjoy sounds of nonsense words that tell a story.

Find some lullabies.

After finishing reading The Twisted Threads of Polly Freeman

Discussion questions:

- How did the book make you feel?
- What was it in the story, and the way in which it was written, that made you feel that way?
- Of all the things that happen in the story, which scene is the one that you remember most vividly? Why?
- Do you think that Polly and Aunt might get an answer to the letter they have sent to Polly's father?

Task One:

Write the response letter that Polly and Aunt receive from either Polly's father or from his regiment to say what has happened to him. Can you surprise your readers or listeners as well as the characters in the story in some way?

Write the scene when they receive that response.

Extra: Find the discharge papers of real George Rose online. As the author tells in the Historical Afterword, Polly's father was based on him.