

Reading Thematic Overview

'At the sign of the sugared plum' – Mary Hooper

At the Sign of the Sugared Plum is set during the Great Plague of 1665, highlighting the fear, death, and chaos that gripped London. Through the protagonist, Hannah, we see the devastating impact of the plague on ordinary lives as people struggle to survive against a deadly and uncontrollable illness.

English

At the Sign of the Sugared Plum allows Year 7 pupils to explore narrative fiction through historical storytelling, character development, and structure. Set in 1665 London, it provides an engaging context to analyse how language, dialogue, and narrative style reflect the period. Pupils can examine how historical events like the Plague are represented through fiction, and explore the evolution of English vocabulary and idiom over time, comparing 17th-century usages to contemporary English.

Technology

The story opens a creative window into the 17th-century world of handcrafted objects. Pupils can investigate how children of the time might have played, linking to historical toys and traditional materials. They can design and make simple plague-era inspired toys (e.g., wooden dolls, spinning tops) using modern tools and materials, learning about the design process, function, user needs, and safe working practices, developing both creativity and practical making skills.

Geography

Hannah's relocation to London represents the typical movement from rural areas to cities for economic reasons, contributing to urban growth. The novel also illustrates how crises like the plague triggered mass migration, with many fleeing to the countryside for safety, temporarily reducing city populations. London's role as a thriving urban centre is central to the story. Economic activity, trade, and social opportunities attracted people to the city, accelerating urbanisation. The novel captures the challenges of adapting to life in a crowded, expanding city, where overcrowding and poor sanitation made it vulnerable to diseases like the plague.

Science

The book prompts discussions on the scientific understanding of disease during the plague and contrasts it with modern atomic theory and medicine. Pupils can explore the basic concepts of atoms, elements, and compounds through the preparation of herbal remedies and plague preventatives used in the story. The busy soundscape of 17th-century London offers a stimulus for studying sound.

Art

The theme of the plague and the setting of London offer rich artistic opportunities. Pupils can Record their responses to the historical atmosphere through sketches or mood boards, Analyse imagery from the book and historical sources, Think about symbolism (e.g., rats as a motif of disease and fear), and Show their interpretation through expressive mixed media pieces.

History

The novel vividly portrays the rapid spread of the bubonic plague through London, causing widespread panic and leading to quarantine measures and house lockdowns. The plague resulted in numerous deaths, business closures, and social breakdown, affecting both the rich and the poor. Many fled the city, mirroring historical events where urban populations evacuated during such outbreaks.

Hannah's move to London for work reflects a common reason for migration: the search for better job opportunities in cities, despite the risks. This aligns with the 17th-century trend of people migrating to improve their economic prospects and survive.

