

*An
Inspector
Called
and other stories*

Textual Transformations
by Barbara Bleiman



EMC

Publications

An Inspector Called & Other Stories

Stories by Barbara Bleiman

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INTRODUCTION FOR TEACHERS

This anthology is a collection of short stories based on texts that students often study in school. Each story explores key aspects of a chosen text, such as themes, ideas, characters or context. Sometimes the stories explore big ideas about what it means to study literature in English classrooms.

Intertextuality is a key concept in English. It is the idea that texts do not spring up out of nowhere; they are invariably part of long traditions – literary conversations, if you like – that build up over time. Texts operate within genres, they follow conventions, but also often update, subvert or challenge them. They can refer to other texts explicitly and sometimes offer direct commentary on what's come before. Texts are adapted, quoted, alluded to, paid homage to, consciously and subconsciously drawn on.

Students these days are reading lots of canonical texts, perhaps more so than in the recent past. Prescriptions and proscriptions from government ministers and Awarding Body choices have led to students studying more nineteenth-century novels, including lengthier and sometimes challenging texts, and more poetry from the past – and doing this at a much younger age. And though it's great to see students being introduced to challenging material, these texts do not always reflect the realities of the students' lives; they do not necessarily find themselves in the texts and nor do all students find them a pleasurable, engaging read. It was being made aware of teachers and students having to work very hard to lift some of these texts off the page that was the spark for this anthology and made it spring into life. What if I could write lots of different angles, re-tellings and interpretations of these texts, to open up new ideas and ways of reading them? What if I could add to the traditions represented in these texts, with adaptations and angles of my own? What if a collection of related stories could act as fresh ways in, whetting students' appetites and getting their thinking going, as well as offering new angles for after reading? They could offer the viewpoint of a

character left on the side lines; there could be prequels or sequels, pastiches or serious imitations, updated versions or adaptations. Equally, the stories could offer many different perspectives – for instance female views and voices alongside male ones, with characters and settings that are sometimes marginalised in those canonical texts, at least some of which could reflect the realities of students' lives. The adolescents in some of these texts for instance, could be brought into the foreground, via modern re-tellings, or tellings from a young person's point of view.

Many of the stories try to offer a thematic exploration that can throw light on the original text. *An Inspector Calls*, for instance, has become 'An Inspector Called', where a class, reading and studying Priestley's play, suddenly find themselves, like the characters in the play, experiencing a spookily disturbing moral wake-up call. *Oliver Twist* is seen through the eyes of the Artful Dodger and for *Macbeth*, the story of the teenage Fleance, who only speaks a few words in Shakespeare's play, is filled out. I thought that young people might be interested in the kind of dangerous world that a boy of their own age would have had to navigate to stay alive.

I have looked for angles that might be enjoyable for a young adult audience but not all the stories have a teenage perspective or protagonist. Hardy's 'Neutral Tones', for instance, imagines the loss of love at the end of an adult relationship, the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* is given a narrative of her own, and one story is told by an ex-teacher, now a writer. In each case, I've been juggling different elements – how to use the source text itself and do justice to it, the teenage audience (and teacher audience) and my own judgements about what might make a good story and how I want to write it.

As I said at the start, the idea of intertextuality is at the heart of all literary creative endeavour. It's also at the heart of all literary study – we appreciate Shakespeare for what he's done with source material, for how he uses and adapts existing genres, for how his representations of race or gender compare with that of his contemporaries, for how his work has been interpreted, re-fashioned, drawn on for inspiration

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across the centuries. Likewise, all writers are constantly re-inventing traditions of writing, ‘putting new wine into old bottles’, as Angela Carter described it. In this anthology, I hope that students will enjoy seeing that process in action, discovering how new adaptations can themselves be interpretations of a text and seeing how they themselves might engage in a similar process of re-inventing and re-imagining the texts they are studying at school.

Notes for using this collection

This is a collection that might straddle different year groups and be used by teachers at the point at which they are teaching one of the related texts. So, ‘Dodger’ might be read with a Year 7 class reading extracts from *Oliver Twist*, ‘Fleance’ with a Year 8 class studying *Macbeth*, ‘As Usual’ with a Year 9 class who have read and talked about Blake’s ‘London’ and ‘A Square in Soho’ with a Year 10 class who have just finished reading *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Perhaps a Year 7 class might read ‘Mahmood’ as part of a broader set of discussions around poetry, or around the nature of literary study and culture.

Each story is different. Some might offer a good way into a text – a way of whetting students’ appetite; others are better left till after the text has been read, as an after-reading activity, encouraging discussion of the text. In some cases, the stories could offer students ideas for ways of interpreting the stories themselves, through their own imaginative recreations and adaptations. While many will benefit greatly from being read alongside the original text, several also work as stand-alone stories, raising broader issues about texts, culture and tradition.

It’s worth noting that if students are studying a text for public examination, it’s important that they distinguish clearly between the original text and the story based on it. Each story is an interpretation, a re-envisioning, rather than a definitive presentation of the original text.

Barbara Bleiman

INTRODUCTION FOR STUDENTS

This anthology is a collection of short stories based on texts that you may well be studying in English – plays by Shakespeare, well-known poems by famous writers of the past, nineteenth-century novels, popular twentieth-century set texts like *Animal Farm* or *Lord of the Flies*. Each story in the collection is in conversation with one of these texts – exploring key aspects, such as themes, ideas, characters or context. Sometimes the stories explore big ideas about what it means to study literature in English classrooms. When I wrote them, my idea was to open up fresh ways of thinking about the texts you encounter in English – to offer new angles and ways of thinking about them that might intrigue you, make you think differently about those texts and inspire you to write versions of your own.

Here are some of the things that the stories try to do:

- Sometimes they offer the viewpoint of a character left on the sidelines in the original text
- Some are prequels or sequels, imagining what might have happened before or after the action of the original text
- Some try to imitate something about the style of the original
- Some update aspects of the storyline and offer a contemporary re-imagining, particularly focusing on the experience of young people
- Some add in fresh voices, ones that are left on the margins of the original text, reflecting a different set of realities from our world and experiences
- Some weave between the original and the new text, bringing the original into the new one in unexpected ways.

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In each case, the new story is an 'interpretation' of the text and offers ways of thinking about the original. You might read some of the stories before reading the original, though probably the majority will be more interesting to read afterwards, when you can ask yourself questions like these:

- How does the story relate to the original text?
- What has the writer been most interested in bringing out in the story?
- In what ways do I think differently about the text as a result of reading the short story? Have I been struck by anything I hadn't thought of before?
- Do I like what the writer has done with the text and, if so, what did I especially enjoy about it?
- What do I think about the story, in its own right? Was it a good story and, if so, why?
- Might I be able to write my own story/poem/playscript, re-imagining the text, just as these short stories have done?

I hope you enjoy reading my stories alongside the texts you are studying. I hope they also inspire you to join in the long tradition of writers writing in response to other texts, by joining me in writing ones of your own too!

Barbara Bleiman

An Inspector Called

Inspired by *An Inspector Calls*, a play by
J.B. Priestley, first performed in 1945

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Last period on Friday afternoon. A light dusting of snow on the ground outside, wind rattling the windows, darkness coming on, and Mr McMurdo was standing at his desk with a pile of books stacked high. *An Inspector Calls*. The GCSE set play. Class 10 Dickens filed in one by one, and though there was supposed to be silence, instead there's an unmistakable murmuring, not quite a groan, more of a sigh.

'Saffron, Freddie, Desiree, the books, please!'

The three students scraped their chairs back loudly. Saffron leapt up, Freddie and Desiree slouched over towards his table. They filled their arms with the dog-eared paperbacks and shared them out among the class.

'Act 3 page 56,' Mr McMurdo said. 'Same parts as last time but before we start reading perhaps let's have a little recap. So, there's been a posh family dinner and they've been drinking port and celebrating the engagement of Sheila and Gerald. Arthur, the father, announces that he thinks he's going to be given a knighthood, so long as there are no scandals in his family. After dinner he lectures Gerald about his views on politics. He's not very keen on the new ideas spreading that he sees as socialist and dangerous and advises him and his son to look out for their own interests rather than getting caught up with wild ideas about helping others in society. The son... his name anyone?'

'Ernie?' shouted Finn.

'Eric,' said Mr McMurdo, smiling to himself. 'Eric is being awkward. A bit unpleasant. OK. The whole play has set up all kinds of issues. When we talk about books, what do we call them?' Silence. 'Themes,' he said. 'I told you that last time. We call them themes.'

'Responsibilities to one's family or to other people,' shouted Winsome. 'To people worse off than you.'

‘Yes,’ said Mr McMurdo. ‘But next time put your hand up before you speak!’

Winsome’s hand shot up. Mr McMurdo waited a moment. ‘Yes, Winsome. Would you like to add something?’

‘They’re all lying and pretending,’ she said. ‘Is that a theme? And they’re hiding things from each other, like Gerald not telling Sheila what he was up to when he was away and Mr Birling being all smug and full of himself and thinking he ought to have everyone admiring him but they’ve all treated Eva Smith really badly and even Edna, the servant, they treat her like sh...’

‘Winsome!’ Mr McMurdo warned.

‘... like she’s a nobody, just ’cause she’s got no money.’

Callum said, ‘That’s a theme, isn’t it? Class. Class prejudice and keeping the working class down.’ Callum knew about these things. He was interested in politics.

‘Treating other people badly,’ shouted Milly

‘Not knowing what it’s like to be poor,’ Harry added.

‘Being all la di da and snobbish and rich and not really caring what happens to other people,’ said Clara.

‘Using them,’ Ahmed said, ‘and then letting them suffer. Not protecting the weak.’

‘Hypocritical,’ Winsome said. ‘Pretending to be all nice and perfect and then behaving like... like... monsters.’

‘Immoral!’ shouted Desiree. ‘Unprincipled!’

‘I hate them,’ Freddie yelled. ‘They’re rubbish!’

‘They’re not fit to wipe...’ Finn started.

Mr McMurdo clapped his hands. ‘That’s enough, everyone. No more shouting out. Put your hands up and wait your turn.’ There were some complaints, a bit of eye rolling, sighing, teeth

sucking. Mr McMurdo hesitated. ‘That was really good, though,’ he said, once everyone had quietened down, a little smile spreading over his face. ‘Hypocritical. Immoral. Unprincipled. Those are such great words. You’ve really nailed the themes, all of you, and... and I’m proud of you.’

Everyone relaxed and Winsome put up her hand this time. ‘That inspector though... the one who turns up and says there’s been a death and starts questioning them all, that’s very weird. How did he know all about them? I think that’s a bit spooky.’

‘Good, Winsome. Spooky. Strange. Uncanny one might say. Did anyone else think that?’

Suddenly everyone was yelling. Clara was trying to be heard, Ahmed and Finn were disagreeing loudly, Milly was thrusting her hand in the air saying, ‘Me, sir, me sir, me!’, Saffron was muttering over and over ‘a ghost, he’s a ghost,’ in a quavering voice and Desiree was wailing ‘wooooo, wooooo!’. Freddie was rattling his desk, pretending to be shaking with fright.

Mr McMurdo tried to raise his voice above the clamour.

‘OK everyone. That’s enough. Open your books. I want you to answer the questions up on the whiteboard. And I want silence. Right now! Right this very minute!’

His face was pink and he was sweating. He mopped his brow with his hand. He was new to teaching and 10 Dickens were not the easiest of classes, though he had to admit they were sparky and funny and it was always interesting to see what they’d have to say. In a way, this little episode had been one of the best moments he’d had with them, despite the shouting out. They’d seemed really interested in the play and he’d been surprised by how much they’d taken from it, much more than he’d imagined possible. But he was aware that he shouldn’t be letting them make so much noise. Noise was enemy number one and Mrs Bennett, the Head of English wouldn’t be at all impressed. She’d

A Square in Soho

Inspired by *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, a novella by Robert Louis Stevenson,
first published in 1886

A square in Soho. That's where my father said our new home was going to be. It was a flat in a large old house, with stone steps up to the door, a big bell-pull, metal railings and a deep drop to a basement below street level. The old photo Dad showed me before we left our previous house looked amazing – like a grand mansion from out of a black and white film. We were going to be on the first floor, just two bedrooms, a small living room and a narrow galley kitchen carved out of the space, but with high ceilings and a huge fireplace in the living room. It had just come vacant from the current occupant – a stroke of luck, and with no rent to pay, an even bigger one. It was owned by Arthur, an uncle of Dad's who'd inherited it from his father, Frederick. Arthur was a lawyer, from a family of lawyers, and he'd kept hold of this place apparently, even though he'd never lived in it himself, nor had paying tenants. But anyhow, he said we could stay there for nothing, if we liked, and Dad jumped at the chance, knowing that, having lost his job where we lived before, it might take him a while to get set up with work in London. Dad was an accountant and that's a pretty good thing to be, but one day he had a job and the next he didn't. We were forced to move out of our house fast. Maybe he'd done something wrong? I didn't like to ask too many questions.

Dad had always talked about this house in Soho, like it was an important part of our family history, a bit of a mystery too. Seemingly, it had come into the hands of Great Uncle Freddie in strange circumstances. He'd inherited it from his father, a man called Gabriel John Utterson. Dad's uncle Arthur had never explained this to Dad and Dad hadn't liked to ask. I expect he thought maybe it was some dodgy financial deal or something. But why had Great Uncle Freddie seemingly never lived there? And why did uncle Arthur keep the place, if he was himself neither living there, nor charging rent to the occupants who occasionally took up residence?

Dad settled us in – if unpacking a few bags and boxes can be called that – and then headed out to find a supermarket or grocery store to buy some food. We hadn't eaten since late morning and I was starving. Alone in the house, I went from room to room, examining everything.

The flat was shabbily furnished, in an old-fashioned style and felt very different from our bright, light, modern house in the suburbs. In the living room, large old armchairs, with lumps and bumps in the stuffing, and threadbare coverings, sat alongside an overbearing wooden sideboard. Lighting was by rickety standing lamps, with an ancient centre shade that cast a half-hearted, gloomy haze over the room. It was large and unwelcoming.

By contrast my bedroom was tiny, with just enough space for a bed and a chest of drawers, and a narrow built-in cupboard to hang clothes in. It had a small window that should have looked out onto the garden square but it was covered in dust and cobwebs, so the view out was obscured. Dad's room was a little bigger, though without a window and a bed that looked as if it might collapse at any moment. In the bathroom, an ancient cast-iron bath took up most of the space. There was a steady drip, drip, drip from a leaking tap and yellow stains down towards the plug hole, where a giant spider sat waiting and watching, as if mesmerised. The kitchen was fine. Basic but fine. Thank goodness, I thought. At least there's one room in the place that doesn't look as if it's come straight out of a horror movie.

As I came back into my bedroom to finish unpacking, I noticed a narrow door in the hallway opposite. It was shut. Dad hadn't mentioned a third bedroom, so I wondered what might be behind it. I went to open it, but when I turned the handle I found that it was locked. Perhaps it was just a cupboard for the hot water tank, or for brooms, I thought, and then forgot about it, as I set to the task of putting sheets on my bed, getting my clothes into the drawers and making my room feel a bit more like home.

Fleance

Inspired by Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*,
first performed in 1606

BANQUO

How goes the night, boy?

FLEANCE

The moon is down; I have not heard the clock.

BANQUO

And she goes down at twelve.

FLEANCE

I take't, 'tis later, sir.

These are the only words spoken by Fleance in William Shakespeare's play Macbeth.

So, you might ask what I'm doing up after midnight, with me just having turned thirteen, a growing boy in need of my beauty sleep. Not old enough, you might think, to be out here, on a stormy, black night, banging on the castle gates, in the howling winds, with rain soaking through my worsted cape and mud clogging my leather boots, rather than covered in warm beaver fur in my nice cosy bed. Well, it's my father you see. He wanted me out here with him tonight. Told me he had business to do, and I was to join him, sleepy or not. Said he didn't want me at home on my own.

My mother's not around anymore, you see. Not since my brother was born and she, well... it's quite hard for me to even say the words, but she didn't get through little Fraser's birth, and then he wasn't around for very long after that either. Fraser was too sickly a baby, the wet nurse told my father. He wasn't long for this world. And the woman was right – he died that same night, along with my mother. My big sister Mathilda had passed away not long before Fraser and my mother, and little Donald before that, and my older brother Fergus of scarlet fever just a few years previously, and my oldest sister Catriona went south to be married to a man from the borders and we've not seen or heard of her since, nor the servants who escorted her. Killed by brigands, Dad fears, stealing her dowry on the journey to

Northumberland to marry the earl. So now it's just me and him, father and son. And he seems not so bothered as my mother was about what time I get to bed.

'A good night's sleep, that's what you need,' she used to say. 'And then you can wake up with the lark and be out in the farms and the fields, in the blue grey heather of the hills and gazing into the deep slate black waters of the glens, learning about the world of nature around you. You must tend to Bonnie every morning when the cocks crow and every evening when the sun goes down. And exercise him each day, to keep him sleek and strong,' she'd say. (Bonnie's my piebald horse, my pride and joy.)

'Practise stringing your bow and shooting an arrow. Use an axe to chop logs and a knife to whittle the wood to a fine point, like a dagger. Talk to people,' she'd say. 'Find out what they think and what they know. Speak to the yeoman who keeps a falcon and the blacksmith who fashioned your father's sword. Sit with Macduff and your father as they talk, and take in every word of what they discuss. All of that will stand you in good stead. It will help make a man of you, a man who endures, who survives what life has to hurl his way.' She'd sigh. I suppose she'd seen enough of death to think that life had to be fought for. It didn't come easy.

Now that it's just him – my father, Banquo, and me – there's no-one to say those things, to question what I do, to ask whether I'm getting enough sleep, eating enough meat and ale, learning the ways of the world. She's not here to stop me from growing up too soon, either. The lump in my throat is there again. It makes it hard not to cry when I think of her, so I try not to do that too much.

To be truthful, my father's changed recently. At first, after mother died, he was quite watchful of me. Tender, almost. I'd catch him looking at me with a frown on his face, checking to see if I was OK. He'd come and take a look at me when I went

to my bed, to see I wasn't having nightmares, or being spooked by ghosts and ghouls. But then he was called away to fight in Duncan's army, leaving me in the care of our old servant woman, Meg, and after the initial joy of his return, the tales of bloody battles won and narrow escapes from death, he's seemed distracted, especially since the murder of the King. He's been worrying about that, I think, and the stuff that's been going on among the earls and the lords – Macduff, Macbeth and some of the others. There've been unexpected visits late at night, horses galloping into the courtyard, steaming with sweat, hurried servants re-heating food for guests. There've been stirrings and whispers, quiet conversations in corridors and in front of a dying fire, people arguing and then going silent when a servant or another person enters the room. Ever since they got back victorious from battle. Ever since King Duncan came to stay at Macbeth's castle and then was murdered. Ever since the accusations of traitorous servants. Ever since Macbeth took over the throne. Ever since. Nothing has felt right. Nothing has been the same.

And now, on a wild night like this one, my father is determined to have me with him, midnight or not. Perhaps just having me there is a comfort to him? Maybe he wants me to know more about his affairs? Or maybe he's afraid to leave me on my own? Recently, he's been saying things, dropping a few hints and when I ask him questions, he's mentioned the odd thing that he tells me to remember, little fragments that I'm starting to piece together, like a complicated puzzle with lots of broken bits and missing parts. Maybe he thinks I'm old enough now and should grow up a bit? There's stuff I should know.

I went to see Lady Macduff a week or so ago, riding on Bonnie, out across the moor. I like Lady Macduff and I especially like her little bairn, Jamie. He shows me his caged rabbits and the moorhens and ducks in the fish pond on their land, and jumps all over me when I arrive. And Lady Macduff