

## ***The Severed Land* by Maurice Gee Teacher Notes**

### **Before Reading:**

1. Before reading the book, look at the cover image and title. Discuss what you think this book might be about and who you think its readership might be?
2. Read the author's dedication (p. 5). If you wrote a book, to whom would you dedicate it and what would the dedication say?

### **Themes:**

1. Discuss the following themes and find examples from the book which illustrate each:
  - a. heroism
  - b. nature
  - c. survival skills
  - d. the struggles of loyalty and trust
  - e. the wonders of mystery and magic
  - f. family relationships, humanity, collaboration and love
  - g. politics and justice
  - h. the effects of war
  - i. authority and the corruption of power
  - j. control and justice
  - k. the horrors of slavery and lack of personal freedoms
  - l. the impact of death, loss and abandonment
2. What other themes can you find in the novel?
3. What do you think is the main theme of the novel? Write an essay on your choice.

### **Setting:**

The book is set in a fantasy world full of predatory thieves, slave masters, beggars, dippers, mudlarks, drain-sliders, spies and wall-men. It is a world where the ruling families are caught up in a lethal power struggle.

### **Language features, structure and narrative:**

1. The genre of this book is fantasy adventure. List the aspects that are

indicative of this genre with examples from the book.

2. The story is told in the third person. Why do you think the author chose to do this? Is it effective? Why or why not? Choose one of your favourite passages from the novel and rewrite it in first person narrative from one of the featured character's point of view. Then, compare the two versions and discuss their differences. Do you think the first person narration is more effective? Is there anything you prefer about the third person narration?
3. Figurative language is used to convey ideas that might otherwise be difficult to express. An example of this is a simile, such as, 'The nooses hung side by side, like serving spoons on a scullery wall.' (p. 131) Find more examples from the book.
4. The author uses animal imagery in some similes, for example, 'Cruelty came sniffing there like a stoat.' (p. 61) and 'The boy snatched the cake and was away, quick as a hare.' (p. 69). Think of ten other animals that could feature in the world of this novel, such as cougars and forest cats, and create a simile for each.
5. The author uses nature imagery in some similes, for example, 'Its mouth bloomed like a flower...' (p. 11) and 'She picked up one of his hands. It was as light and dry as dead twigs.' (p. 37). Write a poem about a force of nature using three similes.
6. Fliss states that the dawn 'takes a breath' (p. 39). What figure of speech is this an example of? Write a poem or descriptive paragraph which includes at least one example of this figure of speech.
7. The following is an alliterative phrase: 'sooty smoke' (p. 12). What is alliteration? Think of examples of alliteration for ten other letters of the alphabet.
8. Find definitions of the words from the novel below. Write a sentence for each or use them to create a glossary for the novel. You may like to add any words from the novel that are new to you.
  - a. undulated (p. 8)
  - b. gourd (p. 8)
  - c. patriarch (p. 12)
  - d. epaulettes (p. 16)
  - e. serene (p. 37)
  - f. cawing (p. 39)
  - g. retort (p. 46)
  - h. futile (p. 60)

- i. bravado (p. 61)
- j. servile (p. 82)
- k. monotonous (p. 83)
- l. wheedled (p. 84)
- m. amiably (p. 85)
- n. obeisance (p. 106)
- o. ecstatic (p. 133)
- p. solemn (p. 133)
- q. placidly (p. 154)
- r. iridescent (p. 161)

**Characters:**

1. Do you like Fliss and Kirt/Keef as characters? Do you think they are realistic characters? Why or why not? Compare and contrast their personalities, opinions and actions, and analyse how they are influenced by one another. Use quotes from the novel to support your points.
2. Do you think Fliss is a strong protagonist? Why or why not? Which other characters do you feel display strength? In pairs, write character studies of five of the main characters. Begin by making a chart to list the strengths and weaknesses of each. How do their particular strengths and weaknesses affect the part they play in the novel?
3. Lorna and Kirt/Keef are twin brother and sister. What do you think are the defining aspects of this unusual sibling relationship? Do you believe that their relationship develops and changes though the book? If so, list what these changes are and the main events which contribute to the development?
4. Choose an important event from the novel and describe Fliss and Kirt/Keef's reactions to it? What are the different pressures on Fliss and Kirt/Keef throughout the novel? What factors lead to the decisions they make and how do they cope with the various situations they find themselves in? Note some of some the differences and similarities between Fliss and Kirt/Keef, for example their physicality (pp. 25-26), their social standing (p. 25) and their attitudes to nature and the world around them (p. 45).
5. What does the novel say about friendships and/or family and their importance during difficult times? List examples of episodes when friends and/or family are either a help or a hindrance to Fliss and Kirt/Keef.
6. Think of three adjectives to describe the following characters: Shoo, Lorna, Mutch, Old Minnie and Anton Morisette. In pairs, read your adjectives to your partner and see if they can guess the character you are describing.

7. Draw a picture of one of the characters based on their physical description, for example, a Morisette soldier (pp. 8-9), the Old One (p. 49), Lorna as 'The Despiner Nightingale' (p. 105), Gook, the Morisette crier (p. 105) or Porl Morisette, the patriarch (p. 178).
8. Choose a character from the book, other than Fliss or Kirt/Keef, to write a character study on. What part do they play in the novel? Think about the development of the character throughout the book, and how your chosen character's attributes and actions affect those around them.
9. Which character do you particularly like or dislike? Why?
10. Which character do you most identify with? Why?

### **Close-reading/Comprehension Questions:**

#### **Chapter one**

1. Why does Fliss laugh when the explosion came (p. 8)? What does this indicate about her relations with the inhabitants on the other side of the wall?
2. How long has it been since Fliss fled Galp for the wall (p. 9)? How do you know?
3. What job did Fliss' parents have (p. 9)? Were these typical jobs for the inhabitants of the country?
4. Why would she not cry when thinking about her lost parents (p. 9)? What does this tell us about Fliss as a character?
5. Why does Fliss not run to tell the Old One and Shoo about the new cannon (p. 10)? What does this suggest about their attitudes towards the wall and the ongoing war?
6. Why does Fliss begin to turn away from the drummer boy at the wall (p. 15)? What past events she had witnessed, mentioned earlier in the chapter, may have led her to behave in this way?
7. Why does Fliss not like the drummer boy immediately after rescuing him by dragging him through the wall (p. 17)? What does this tell us about her past?
8. How does Fliss feel about having been able to reach through the wall (p. 18)?

#### **Chapter two**

9. What do we learn about the relationship between the Old One and the wall in this chapter (p. 21)?
10. What does Fliss do when she is sitting all day in the tree (pp. 23-24)?
11. What dangerous animals live on Fliss' side of the wall (p. 25)?
12. What do Fliss and Shoo think may have led to the boy becoming a drummer boy when he was already too old to hold such as position and what further evidence to back their opinion do they find when Shoo takes his jacket off (pp.

24-25)? What more does this tell us about the society on the other side of the wall?

13. How and why did Shoo's people get rid of the flag and what were the repercussions of their actions by the families and the People (pp. 30-31)?
14. Where does the Old One want Fliss and the boy to go and why do you think he wants them to do this (p. 35)?

### **Chapter three**

15. The Old One tells Fliss the reasons why the boy will treat Fliss badly (p. 37). What are they and what does this tell us further about society south of the wall?
16. Why and how is Fliss 'sickened' by both the boy and the Morisette officer (p. 41)?
17. What did the boy do to his own jacket in order to offend the Morisette officer and soldiers, how did they react and what affect did this have on Fliss (pp. 42-43)?
18. Why does the drummer boy assume he can order Fliss around and how does the drummer boy react when Fliss disobeys him (pp. 44-48)?
19. What reasons does Kirt Despinier give when he finally agrees to obey Fliss (p. 48)?

### **Chapter four**

20. What is Kirt's reaction to the Old One and is it in keeping with what we know of his character so far (p. 49-51)?
21. How does Kirt know that the Lorna who whispers to the Old One must be his sister (pp. 53-56)? What does this tell us about their family and Kirt and Lorna's relationship?
22. Why has Lorna been kept locked up, both by her own family and then by Anton Morisette (pp. 54-55)?
23. What do we learn about Anton Morisette as a character in this chapter (pp. 55-57)?
24. What does the Old One want Fliss and Kirt to do (p. 58)?

### **Chapter five**

25. Why does Fliss feel 'little hostility' to Kirt and do you think her reasons are justified (p. 61)?
26. What feeling is given for driving Kirt on and what affect does this have on Fliss (p. 61)?
27. What was Kirt's cover story and why did Fliss have to walk three paces behind him throughout their journey (pp. 61-62)?
28. What is Kirt's new name and why does he not like it (p. 63)?
29. Why does Kirt admit he should have let Fliss help him to go back through the wall (pp. 64-65)?
30. What does hearing the sound of the cannon boom bring home to Fliss (p. 65)?

31. What has Kirt's life as a drummer boy done to his character and how is this beneficial in his and Fliss' current situation (p. 67)?
32. Why are there only women and children in the town (p. 71)?
33. What happens in the village and why does Fliss not want to walk with Kirt after they escape (p. 72-73)?

### **Chapter six**

34. What does Kirt feel about the scars he has on his face (pp. 76-77)?
35. How does Fliss manage to steal the purse off the Carp official (pp. 78-80)?
36. Why does Fliss like shags and how might this relate to her feelings about Kirt (p. 82)?
37. Why does Fliss feel sorry and afraid for Kirt while she sits at his feet on the scow (p. 82)?
38. What line of business are the mummings referring to when they want to pay for Fliss (p. 84)?
39. What advice does Mutch give Kirt and Fliss while on the scow (pp. 86-87)?
40. What are the reasons behind Fliss choosing to trust Mutch (p. 88)? Do you think these are good reasons?

### **Chapter seven**

41. What is the best advice Mutch can give Keef about his chances in Galp and how does Keef react to this advice (p. 91)?
42. Who does Fliss remember they are bringing Lorna back to and what affect does it have on her (p. 95)?
43. What is the punishment for abducting a free woman in Galp and how does knowing this help Fliss (p. 98)?
44. Why does Fliss want to hug Keef after she shares the news she heard in the market (p. 100)?
45. Why is the square called 'Morisette Square' (p. 103)?
46. Why does Lorna start to sing the Despiner song and what affect does it have (p. 108)?

### **Chapter eight**

47. Why is the girl called 'Old Minnie' (p. 112)?
48. Why does Fliss tell Mutch and the other men the truth about her past and the wall and do they believe her (pp. 115-125)?
49. What has happened to the Despiner family and what effect does Mutch think this will have on the rest of the ruling Families (p. 120)?

### **Chapter nine**

50. What does Fliss think is the cause of Minnie's temper softening as they walk (p. 127)?
51. What are they carrying and who is it for (pp. 127-128)?
52. What does Minnie want Fliss to place in Poddy and Zizz's pockets and what is it for (pp. 129-130)?

53. Why do the ladies hold nosegays and posies in Morisette Square (p. 131)?
54. What does Fliss do to Anton Morisette and what do her actions help avoid happening (p. 137)?
55. What does Lorna do to Keef and why (p. 138)?

### **Chapter ten**

56. Why does Mutch want to take the boat to the fishing village (p. 144)?
57. Why is Fliss jealous of Lorna, what does she do with this emotion and why do you think she does this (p. 146)?
58. What do Mutch and Fliss both want (p. 147)?
59. How did being tortured by Anton Morisette change Keef and how do Fliss and Mutch react to this (pp. 149-150)?
60. What brand does Minnie have on her shoulder (p. 150)?
61. How do Minnie's feelings towards Lorna change and grow, and why (p. 154)?
62. What rumour does Mutch hear about Anton Morisette and what is Keef's reaction to the news (p. 156)?
63. What animal does Mutch compare Anton and Keef to and what are the connotations of such a comparison (p. 156)?
64. Why does Keef throw away the twist of paper Fliss gives him and how does Fliss react to his actions (pp. 158-159)?

### **Chapter eleven**

65. How do they carry Lorna through the forest at first and what do they adapt it to (pp. 160 & 162)?
66. What does Keef do to the marksmen and what does Fliss believe about Keef based on his actions (pp. 165-166)?
67. Why does Mutch want Fliss to come back south of the wall? Where does he tell her to go when she does and why (p. 170)?
68. What state is the Old One when Fliss, Lorna and Minnie arrive (p. 173)?

### **Chapter twelve**

69. What will the headwoman do with the Old One now that he is dead (p. 176)?
70. How does Fliss feel when Lorna and Minnie talk (p. 177)?
71. How does Fliss describe the fight between Anton and Keef (pp. 179-180)?
72. How does Keef die and why (p. 182)?
73. Why does Shoo think Fliss may have died too (p. 183)?

### **Chapter thirteen**

74. What will Shoo and Minnie do now that the Old One is dead (p. 184)?
75. How does Lorna describe what the wall is to Fliss (p. 186)?
76. How long does Fliss have before she will make decision whether or not she will go south of the wall to help Mutch (pp. 186-187)?

### **Activities and Creative Responses:**

1. After a close reading of the novel, imagine you are setting one comprehension question per chapter for an English comprehension examination using *The Severed Land* as the set text. In pairs, ask and answer the questions you have written.
2. Choose your favourite chapter from the book to summarise. Present your summary in a poster, powerpoint, pamphlet or video format to your class.
3. The book is set in a fantasy land. Trace the map from the novel (p. 6). Choose one of the places mentioned in the book and locate it on the map, such as the land north of the wall (pp. 7-9) or the city of Galp (p. 95). Then create and design an entry for a travel book of your chosen place. Include information, such as population size, geography, history, things of interest, weather, etc.
4. In groups, choose one of the families from the oligarchy to become a member of. Think of ways you would display your love of, and loyalty to, your chosen family, such as designing a banner or flag like the Rule flag (p. 29), composing an anthem, such as the Morisette anthem (p. 42) or designing a crest, such as the Carp crest on the stolen purse (p. 81). Present or perform your creation to your class.
5. The fantasy world of the novel is an oligarchy, with many of its inhabitants working in manual jobs or being kept as slaves. All the inhabitants are subjected to severe punishment for crimes. Imagine you are a journalist and choose to write an investigative report into a topic or issue found in the fantasy world of the novel, such as those listed below:
  - A report on the jobs of the inhabitants, such as, a mummer or acrobat (p. 83), a drayman (p. 93), a crier (p. 105), a tallyman (p. 111), a rope-maker or tin-smith (p. 127), a labourer or clerk (p. 130) or a lamplighter (p. 131).
  - A report into the life of a slave (p. 7), such as the gum harvesters (p. 9), miners (p. 9) or cotton mill workers (p. 24).
  - A report into crime and punishment, such as the whippings and hangings for stealing as demanded by Carp law (p. 81).
  - A report into the role of the 'gift-taker' in the city of Galp (p. 98).
  - A report into girls been taken to work in the brothels (p. 84, p. 97 & p. 115). Think about what type of language, sentence and paragraph structure, headings, etc, you would use in your report.
6. Many different foods are mentioned in the novel. Imagine you are a citizen of the city of Galp and create a menu for the day inspired by the food mentioned in the book. This includes, fruit, grain cakes (p. 64), ribs of roasted mutton,



cheese, tubers (p. 81), maize porridge, honey (p. 126), bacon, salt fish, fresh bread (p. 127) and rough wine, cold meat, barley bread (p. 141).

7. The author includes many descriptions of exteriors and interiors, such as, Morisette Square (p. 104) or the interior of the getaway scow (p. 140). Find other examples of descriptions of exterior and interior spaces. Draw one of these based on the descriptions, then describe and draw an exterior and interior space of your choice. In pairs, get your partner to draw your place based on your written description.
8. Choose one of the descriptive passages in the novel which you find particularly effective, such as the description of the river town Kirt and Fliss travel through (p. 77) or the River Spool (p. 82). Draw the scene and/or use the description to set the scene or the mood for your own piece of descriptive writing. Quote the passage as the epigraph for your work (and clearly state the source: title, author, publisher, date, chapter, page number).
9. The novel has many suspense-filled action sequences, such as when the Morisette army attempts to cross the wall in a balloon (p. 5), Fliss stealing the purse from a Carp official (pp. 78-79) and the rescue of Lorna and Kirt (pp. 133-142). Choose one of the action sequences from the book. Study the language the author uses in the sequence, then write a suspense-filled action sequence of your own about something that has happened to you. Alongside your written description also present your sequence in either a comic strip or a movie storyboard format.
10. Describe how the tension builds and falls away during the book. Find a passage in the novel that is of high intensity, such as, when Kirt escapes the Morisette army (pp. 12-13), and another which is of low intensity. Copy both out and compare the language used (choice of words, length of sentences, the pace at which details are revealed). How is language used to create intensity?
11. The novel mentions that the Old One is the last of the Forest People. In small groups, write, design, bind and publish an illustrated children's story book based on the history of the Forest People, the Old One and their role in maintaining the wall. Read your story to a younger class level.
12. Vocabulary relating to war is found throughout the book, such as 'platoon' (p. 5), 'sergeant' (p. 5), 'general' (p. 8), 'officers' (p. 8) and 'foot soldiers' (p. 8). Find some more examples from the book. Write a poem, descriptive paragraph or diary entry about one of the characters and their role in the war. Include some of the war vocabulary you have found.

13. Mutch tells Fliss and Keef that he has heard about the Despiner lad who got away from the Morisettes who 'would give a lot to get their hands on him' (p. 91). Create a 'wanted' poster of Keef that the Morisette family might have circulated throughout the land.
14. Lorna asks Fliss to describe what fire looks like (p. 153). Write a poem or an extended description about how you would describe a fire or an object of your choosing to a blind person. Use descriptive and emotive language so that those who hear your description or poem can comprehend what the object looks like and the emotions it may invoke when it is seen.
15. Fliss describes her old life in Galp as tasting 'sour, thin and cold' (p. 64). Consider your own life or choose one of the other characters from the book. Think of three adjectives to describe succinctly how your/their life might taste.
16. At the end of the novel Fliss is deciding whether she will join Mutch again south of the wall (p. 186). If you were Fliss would you go, why and how would you go about it? Make a list of pros and cons. Then divide the class into two teams and debate the pros and cons of your decision.
17. Imagine you are a film producer attempting to gain financial backing to turn *The Severed Land* into a feature film. Write up your proposal. Include one or two scenes from the novel in film script form and your choices for the soundtrack, casting, location, etc. Or, imagine the novel is going to be turned into a stage play. Design a suitable set, programme notes and an advertising poster for the play.
18. Choose your favourite chapter or event from the novel and create an artistic interpretation of it, for example, a painting, drawing, photograph, model, poem, etc. Or, design your own illustration for the cover.
19. Using the drama convention of 'hot-seating', in pairs, choose two of the characters to embody, for example Lorna and Minnie. Get the class to ask questions about what it is like to be these characters, your relationship and how you feel about each other.
20. Choose a passage about one of the main events of the novel. Write and perform a monologue about an episode in the novel from a character's point of view other than Fliss. Think about the kind of vocabulary your chosen character would use, and how their perspective of the event might differ from that of Fliss. Present your monologue to your class.

21. Maurice Gee is an award-winning New Zealand author. Research and write a short biography on him. Find, read and compare some of his other books, such as those listed at the back of the novel (pp. 188-191).
22. Write a review of the book, aiming it at the readership of your favourite magazine, newspaper or website. Consider the following questions:
- Which characters appealed to you the most? The least?
  - How did the story make you feel as it unfolded?
  - What ideas in the book awakened your interest?
  - What did you dislike or find boring?
  - Who do you think is the target readership?