

Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie

Beryl Bainbridge

Two weeks before Christmas, Angela Hisson gave Mrs Henderson six tickets for the theatre. Mrs Henderson was Angela Hisson's cleaning lady.

'I wanted to avoid giving you money,' Angela Hisson told her. 'Anybody can give money. Somehow the whole process is so degrading. . . taking it. . . giving it. They're reopening the Empire Theatre for a limited season. I wanted to give you a treat. Something you'll always remember.'

Mrs Henderson said, 'Thank you very much.' She had never, when accepting money, felt degraded.

Her husband, Charles Henderson, asked her how much Angela Hisson had tipped her for Christmas.

Mrs Henderson said not much. 'In fact,' she admitted, 'nothing at all. Not in your actual pounds, shillings and pence. We've got tickets for the theatre instead.'

'What a discerning woman,' cried Charles Henderson. 'It's just what we've always needed.'

'The kiddies will like it,' protested Mrs Henderson. 'It's a pantomime. They've never been to a pantomime.'

Mrs Henderson's son, Alec, said *Peter Pan* wasn't a pantomime. At least not what his mother understood by the word. Of course, there was a fairy-tale element to the story, dealing as it did with Never-Never land and lost boys, *but* there was more to it than that.

'It's written on several levels,' he informed her.

'I've been a lost boy all my life,' muttered Charles Henderson, but nobody heard him.

'And I doubt,' said Alec, 'if our Moira's kiddies will make head nor tail of it. It's full of nannies and coal fires burning in the nursery.'

'Don't talk rot,' fumed Charles Henderson. 'They've seen coal fires on television.'

'Shut up, Charlie,' said Alec. His father hated being called Charlie.

'Does it have a principal boy?' asked Mrs Henderson, hopefully.

'Yes and no,' said Alec. 'Not in the sense you mean. Don't expect any singing or any smutty jokes. It's allegorical.'

'God Almighty,' said Charles Henderson.

When Alec had gone out to attend a union meeting, Mrs Henderson told her husband he needn't bother to come to the theatre. She wasn't putting up with him and Alec having a pantomime of their own during the course of the evening and spoiling it for everyone else.

She'd ask Mrs Rafferty from the floor above to go in his place.

'By heck,' shouted Charles Henderson, striking his forehead with the back of his hand, 'why didn't I think of that? Perish the thought that our Alec should be the one to be excluded. I'm only the blasted bread-winner.'

He knew his wife was just mouthing words. Mrs Rafferty's answer to such an outlandish invitation was a foregone conclusion. She wouldn't give it house room. Mrs Rafferty hadn't been out of the building for five years, not since she was bashed over the head coming home from Bingo.

End of part 1

READING

Who are the main characters?

How are they related?

Draw a character chart.

The short story "Clap hands, here comes Charlie" is closely related to "Peter Pan".

Make a list of the references that may be found in the passage.

"Irony" is dominant in this short story. Can you find the relevant passages that illustrate this?