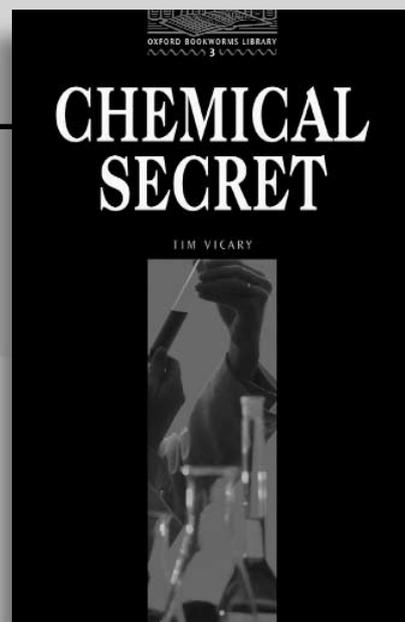


Chemical Secret



Introduction

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The story

John Duncan is a biologist. At the beginning of the story he gets a job with a paint company. His job is to ensure that the chemicals used in the company are safe.

John is a widower, and he lives with his two children, thirteen-year-old Andrew, and sixteen-year-old Christine. For two years he has been unemployed, and getting this job makes a big difference to both him and his children. The family move into a house by the river, near the paint factory. They can go out in their boat and look at the seals on the sandbank near the mouth of the river.

But John discovers that some of the chemicals from the factory are polluting the river. These chemicals are particularly dangerous – they can cause deformities in baby rats, and perhaps in people. He points this out to the company, but it would be very expensive to stop the pollution – too expensive. John has a choice: either he tells the newspapers about his discovery – and loses his job. Or he keeps quiet, and keeps his job. He chooses to keep quiet.

But after some years the pollution does start to cause problems, and these problems are published in articles in the local newspaper, written by Simon, a journalist who is engaged to John's daughter Christine. It is not enough for John to keep quiet: now he has to start telling lies, to say that there is no pollution problem.

Christine and Simon become involved in a campaign against the factory, and one day, demonstrating from a small boat in the river, Christine, who is pregnant, falls in, and is nearly drowned. At a Public Inquiry into the pollution, John is forced to admit that there is a serious problem – and that his daughter's baby is at risk.

At the end of the story, John has lost his job – and Christine will no longer speak to him. And neither he, nor we, know whether her baby is healthy or not.

Background to the story

The story has two central themes. Firstly, it looks at the problems of pollution and of the responsibility of the businesses that cause it. Secondly, it looks at the position of an individual, where personal morality is in conflict with personal security. John has been without work for several years at the beginning of the story, and he is delighted to find a job; particularly because this now means his children can have a better life. As he starts to discover the dangers of the pollution, he is put in a terrible dilemma – and chooses to ignore the dangers in order to preserve his own, and his children's, way of life. But just keeping quiet is not enough, he is forced to start telling lies – until the day when his house of cards collapses, and he is left with nothing.

Discussion points

- 1 Where did John go wrong? At what point in the story should he have tried to stop the waste products polluting the river?
- 2 Do you think businesses do enough to protect our environment?

Chemical Secret

Pre-reading activity

Match the words with the pictures



- a 'It's a group of seal families. The mothers come here every year to have their babies.'
- b Only five metres to go now.
- c 'Where do you think we can find two million pounds?'
- d It was a big, comfortable house, and its gardens went down to the river.

- e 'We're going to be rich . . .!'
- f For two hours John had sat by the telephone, afraid to ring the hospital again.
- g 'These waste products are dangerous! We've got to stop putting them in the river!'
- h 'I'm eighteen! I want to get married!' said Christine.

To the teacher

Aim: To familiarize students with the story and its setting

Time: 10–15 minutes

Organization: Give one copy of the worksheet to each student or each group of students. Ask them to match the words with the appropriate picture. When the students have completed this task, check the answers with them. Then, ask them to put the

pictures into the order they might appear in in the story. It is not important for them to get the order correct. The important thing is to suggest an order which makes sense of the pictures. Some students may notice that one character, John, appears in most of the pictures, but gets progressively older.

Key: 1d, 2g, 3e, 4f, 5b, 6a, 7h, 8c.

Chemical Secret*While reading activity***What will happen next?***Which of these things do you think will happen in the story?*

	WILL HAPPEN	MAY HAPPEN	WON'T HAPPEN	YOUR OWN COMMENTS
John will leave the paint factory.				
John will tell the newspapers about the chemicals.				
John will find a way to stop the chemicals going into the river.				
Some baby seals in the river will be born with no eyes and ears.				
The factory will close.				
The factory will spend two million pounds on machines to clean up the waste products.				
Mary will leave the factory.				
Mary will tell the newspapers about the chemicals.				
John will stay at the factory and get a lot more money.				
Mary will stay at the factory and get a lot more money.				
David Wilson will leave the factory and Mary will get his job.				
David Wilson will leave the factory and John will get his job.				
The factory will get bigger, and more waste products will go into the river.				
John will marry Mary.				
(Your suggestion)				

To the teacher**Where:** At the end of Chapter 6**Aim:** To encourage students to predict the development of the story**Time:** 10–15 minutes**Organization:** Give each student, or group of students, a copy of the worksheet. Ask them to

discuss in groups and decide, without looking beyond the end of Chapter 6, what will happen as the story unfolds. It is not important whether their predictions are correct, although it may be interesting for students to keep their worksheets and see whether or not they were right.

Chemical Secret

After reading activity

Character crosswords

Look at the 'character' crossword for John.

NEEDS A **J**OB
 A BI**O**LOGIST
HURTS HIS LEG
 NEEDS MO**N**EY



Make similar 'crosswords' for some of the other characters.



M
A
R
Y



W
I
L
S
O
N



C
H
R
I
S
T
I
N
E



S
I
M
O
N

To the teacher

Aim: To revise characters

Time: 20–30 minutes

Organization: Give each student, or group of students, a copy of the worksheet and ask them to make character crosswords as in the example.