



World Words

King Rat

China Mieville

Teacher's Notes

The Text

China Mieville's text is taken from the Prologue of his book called 'King Rat', and is the description of an ambitious rat setting off on a mission. The narrator, the rat himself, says 'I have business tonight'. The fact that it is written in the first person increases the threat implied throughout, the threat to humans who the narrator clearly despises but who gleefully admits to feeding off '*your filth and liv(ing) in your house and sleep(ing) under your bed*'. The fact that the rat has a mission which is not stated adds to the threat, and its journey across town, through landscapes both familiar and unfamiliar, heightens the tension. Finally there is the 'red brick of my destination' - the building he has focussed on for that nights 'business'. Could it be our house?

Method

It is important that the students do some creative thinking before they engage with the text, either by listening or by reading. Use the Pre-listening 1 activity first. As the text will be heard as part of a longer broadcast, prepare students for the interview part as well before they listen to it – Pre-Listening Activity 2.

When they have had the opportunity to explore the theme of the text and have contributed some of their own ideas, then they are ready to listen. There is no 'best' way to do this, but the authors would suggest the following method:

1. Students listen to the whole broadcast, checking their activity 2 charts while doing so. Ask them to recall, orally, any words or phrases from the extract after the listening has finished. Write these on the board.
2. Use the words on the board to orally reconstruct the story, as a class activity.
3. Hand out the text and read through. Interrupt with questions if appropriate.
4. Allow the students to listen again, this time with the text in front of them.

Now the students are ready to move onto the final part of the activities. These consist of following through ideas or themes.

Pre-Listening Activity 1

A. The text is full of descriptive words that may not be familiar to the learner of English. However, the writer has chosen many words that are onomatopoeic - they carry some of what they describe in their sound. Students would need to use a dictionary to help them with this activity, unless they are at a very advanced level, if the only purpose was to discover meaning. But one of the purposes of the activity is to try and associate sound with context - the context here describing a rat. Therefore there must be some latitude in allowing students their own descriptions as long as they can describe what the word sounds like to them.

The words that appear in the text, and which are worth re-teaching at this stage are:

dank (*unpleasantly cold and damp*)
darkness (*lack of light*)
filth (*loathsome dirt, pollution*)
noiselessly (*without sound*)
raises gooseflesh (*state of skin caused by fright*)
rattling with long nails (*making noise with tips of nails/claws*)
rubbish (*garbage*)
scale roofs (*climb onto and over roofs*)

scratches (*uses claws to make a noise*)
scuttle (*hurry along, rapid movement*)
slide silently (*move without noise or evident effort*)
slip away (*depart unobserved*)
slither down (*slip with unsteady motion*)
spill over (*go over the edge like liquid*)
squeeze between (*thrust with pressure*)
weave (*move repeatedly from side to side*)

OED Definitions given (NOTE: some words will have different meanings in other contexts)

Note the number of words beginning with 's' - a sound which adds menace, perhaps. Add to the above list: *seep, sepia, shadow, shit, squat, swollen* plus others, which all add to the soundscape being built up by the author.

B. Students should be allowed to speculate but within the context of the vocabulary implications suggested above.

Pre-listening Activity 2

Give students the second pre-listening activity. Ask them to read through the quotations from the radio broadcast and decide who is saying what - writer or student. Then they must choose which category the quotation comes from and to write the appropriate letter in the appropriate square (see answer key below). They then listen to the broadcast to check their answers. The listening activity will have been made easier by this process of identification first.

- a. "It made me think that it went over this building fluidly and smoothly but at the same time, like mercury, it was heavy, dense....."
- b. "The words make it more graphic. All these words - like 'filth' - make it more real in my mind."
- c. "...it doesn't look out of control. I wanted this sense of him rushing but with an extraordinary kind of enclosed control"
- d. "Whenever you visit London you are within 10 feet of a rat, or something like that."
- e. "I don't think it is the job of the writer to say what these levels are because all books are collaborations between writers and readers so I hope the reader will find meanings in them."
- f. "... a kind of organism that is breathing, that's making noise, that has skin, that has lungs, that has a voice box"
- g. You learn all the different levels of a rat's life and for me it was a kind of roller coaster ride of London.
- h. "I'm very much a Londoner and have lived here all my life and it feels very much part of me."

- i. "This character who is speaking is a supernatural figure. He looks like a man but he is the king of the rats, and he is a rat, and he does sometimes bring death."
- j. "I don't know how to describe it other than dark. It was ominous."
- k. "It's as if death is on their back, whispering and waiting to claim that life."
- l. "I wanted the book to open creepily, forbiddingly, so that people were maybe a little chilled, but also intrigued."

	atmosphere	the city	deeper meanings	metaphors
The author	l	d, (f), h	e, i	c, (f)
The students	b, g, j		k	a

During Listening

1. Listen to the broadcast. Students can check their chart for Pre-listening Activity 2 as they do so.
2. Ask them to feed back any words or phrases concerning the story that they remember. It doesn't matter how disjointed they are. As a class activity they will try to rebuild the text from collective memory. Some students will remember parts that others didn't.

Write what they feedback (and is collectively agreed on) on the board - writing the words or phrases in more or less the position on the board to correspond with where it occurred in the text. Gradually a patchwork of remembered phrases will appear. When the ideas stop flowing, prompt the class to paraphrase the story, using what they see on the board as notes.

Now let them listen to the story again and then repeat the activity to see how many more of the gaps can be filled in.

3. Hand out a copy of the text. Allow a few minutes for the students to check what they have recalled with what is on the page.

4. Read through the text (this can be done individually). At appropriately timed spaces ask these questions:

- How do they feel after reading the first paragraph? Does the personalization of the rat talking to them feel uncomfortable?
- How comfortable does the rat feel in the sewers of London?
- Does the rat seem to have a distinct destination in mind?
- At the end, what does the rat mean by 'bait'? Who is being lured into a trap?

5. Play the recording again. This time the students have the text in front of them.

After Listening Activities

1. The students now have a chance to discuss and plan what they think may happen next. To do this they will first need to decide what the immediate purpose of the rat's journey has been, and where the rat now finds itself at the end of the text. Who lives in the house? Why has the rat chosen that house? What does it plan to do? The activity can be simply a discussion - with suggested next actions - or could be a longer activity involving a piece of writing (though no more than a paragraph).

2. In the interview, there is some discussion about metaphors. Which metaphors did you find especially striking? (*open discussion*)

King Rat

I can squeeze between buildings through spaces you can't even see. I can walk behind you so close my breath raises gooseflesh on your neck and you won't hear me. I can hear the muscles in your eyes contract when your pupils dilate. I can feed off your filth and live in your house and sleep under your bed and you will never know unless I want you to.

I climb above the streets. All the dimensions of the city are open to me. Your walls are my walls and my ceilings and my floors.

The wind whips my overcoat with a sound like washing on a line. A thousand scratches on my arms tingle like electricity as I scale roofs and move through squat cosses of chimneys. I have business tonight.

I spill like mercury over the lip of a building and slither down drainpipes to the alley fifty feet below. I slide silently through piles of rubbish in the sepia lamplight and crack the seal on the sewers, pulling the metal cover out of the street without a sound.

Now I am in darkness but I can still see. I can hear the growling of water through the tunnels. I am up to my waist in your shit, I can feel it tugging at me, I can smell it. I know my way through these passages.

I am heading north, submerged in the current, wading, clinging to walls and ceiling. Live things scuttle and slither to get out of my way. I weave without hesitation through the dank corridors. The rain has been fitful and hesitant but all the water in London seems eager to reach its destination tonight. The brick rivers of the underground are swollen. I dive under the surface and swim in the cloying dark until the time has come to emerge and I rise from the deeps, dripping. I pass noiselessly again through the pavement.

Towering above me is the red brick of my destination. A great dark mass broken with squares of irrelevant light. One glimmering in the shadow of the eaves holds my attention. I straddle the corner of the building and ease my way up. I am slower now. The sound of television and the smell of food seep out of the window, which I am reaching towards now, which I am rattling now with my long nails, scratching, a sound like a pigeon or a twig, an intriguing sound, bait.