

Survey of topics and methods

Main focus	pre-reading activity	language	working with the text	comment/discussion	creative writing	further activities	Material
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Understanding the surface structure of the short story and writing an intriguing ending 	●	●	●	●	●	●	Topic 1 ■ "The Child" (extract no. 1)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Understanding black American English ■ Group work using role cards ■ Interpretation of the ending of the original short story ■ Commenting on the impact of education for an individual ■ The concept of the American Dream 		●	●	●		●	Topic 2 ■ "The Child" (extract no. 2)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Analysis of the narrative perspective in "The Child" ■ Characterization of the protagonist Karen ■ Hot seat conversation with Karen 		●	●			●	Topic 3 ■ Karen – a characterization



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The life cycle of disadvantaged black Americans as described in Julius Lester's short story "The Child"

Julius Lester's short story "The Child" was published in 1993 as part of a collection of multi-ethnic short stories for young adults and is set in an unnamed, big city in the USA. At the heart of the action is the seventeen-year-old black American Karen who finds herself confronted with a major emotional crisis. The time span covered in the short story is probably not longer than twenty minutes. The framework of the main action – a black American female teenager waiting for the underground train to arrive and riding on the subway – is interspersed with the thoughts and emotions of the protagonist. Additionally, a small number of flashbacks support the reader's understanding of the protagonist's general plight. Karen has found out that she is pregnant. When she reveals this to her mother, she has to face a fit of anger on her mother's part. The whole situation is made unbearable by the fact that Karen's boyfriend Philip refuses to accept his responsibility as a father.

"The Child" is told from a limited omniscient point of view. The narrator exclusively delves into Karen's thoughts and emotions.

On a structural level, "The Child" can be referred to as a well-written short story: It begins in the middle of an ongoing situation, depicts a single moment of crisis, deals with a limited number of characters and has an open ending. Despite the single moment of crisis, "The Child" tackles a number of topical – or even timeless – issues, such as motherhood, family relationships, growing up in difficult social and economic circumstances, social inequality, racism, dreams and a sense of belonging. Consequently, the short story appeals to readers both from different walks of life and age groups.

About the author

Julius Bernard Lester was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1939. He was the son of a Methodist minister. In 1960 he received his BA from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. He had majored in English and minored in Art and Spanish. In 1961 Lester moved to New York City where he hosted the radio show "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and recorded two albums of traditional and original songs.

"The Child" (extract no. 1) by Julius Lester



When you are no one special and the cutest boy you've ever known comes into your life, he can make you feel soooo good. But then what?

Gently, Karen went down the steps to the subway, flashed her student pass at the attendant in the token booth, and walked through the gate onto the platform. It was morning, though one did not know that beneath the ground. But Karen had not paid much attention to the day before descending the steps stained by traces of urine, wine, soda, cigarette butts¹ and wrappers torn from candy bars. She looked up the track even though she knew the vibrations of the train would be felt and heard before seeing the light from its far-reaching beam². It was something to do, and she needed something to do this morning.

She was small and looked younger than her seventeen years. Being neither prettier nor uglier than any girl that age, there was nothing memorable³ about her. If anyone standing in the subway station had thought to focus attention upon her (and no one did), they might have noticed that she was standing dangerously close to the edge, as if she would not have minded if a breeze or hand had pushed her onto the tracks. They also would have noticed that, unlike the other teenagers waiting for the train, no book bag hung lazily from her shoulder giving a sense of purposefulness⁴. In her jeans and white blouse and with her empty hands, Karen seemed to be without destination or function. But no one noticed.

"I used to be a fighter. Ha! Ha! That's the truth! I fought Muhammad Ali and beat'im! I whupped him so bad they made me quit the ring! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

She turned and stared at the drunk man who had just staggered through the turnstile, spit dribbling from a corner of his mouth and down his chin. His brown face was caked with dirt mixed with dried blood. His clothes reminded her of the subway station steps, and she moved even closer to the edge and peered up the track again. She wondered why she cared if the train ever came. Where was she going to go?

She hadn't really expected her mother to believe she was just putting on weight, not she who was as thin as sorrow.

Worksheet: "The Child" (extract no. 1)



Pre-reading activity

1. Describe what you associate with a story called "The Child". Take notes first before you talk to a fellow student. Finally, talk to the entire class about your ideas.

Language

2. Briefly explain the function of the sentences in direct speech in the given excerpt (ll. 21–22, ll. 33–47, l. 54) from "The Child" by Julius Lester.
3. Find the words in the text that match these definitions.

Definition	Word
a) A continuous shaking movement or feeling	
b) Special, good or unusual and therefore worth remembering or easy to remember	
c) The outside limit of an object, a surface or an area; the part furthest from the centre	
d) Having a useful aim; determination	
e) To walk with weak unsteady steps, as if you are about to fall	
f) A gate at the entrance to a public building that turns in a circle when pushed, allowing one person to go through at a time	
g) To make a sudden, unsteady movement forward	

Working with the text – Use your own words as far as possible

4. Describe the general situation the teenager Karen finds herself in in the given excerpt from "The Child" by Julius Lester.

5. Analyse the following passages from the short story.
- "If anyone standing in the subway station had thought to focus attention upon her (and no one did), they might have noticed that she was standing dangerously close to the edge, as if she would not have minded if a breeze or hand had pushed her onto the tracks." (ll. 13–16)
 - "If you had had your mind on Jesus, you wouldn't be in this condition. How could you let something like this happen?" (ll. 35–36)
 - "All her life she had felt like something happened to the words between the time they left her lips and went toward other people's ears. Was there an invisible thief who stole words from the mouths of girls, leaving them to wonder if they had spoken, leaving them to wonder if they really existed?" (ll. 62–66)

Discussion

6. a) Discuss possible continuations of Karen's story in groups of three students. Finally, agree on one continuation for your complete group.
- b) Use flash cards to write down essential keywords concerning your storyline.
- c) A representative of your group presents your continuation to the entire class. Pin your flashcards on the board or wall while telling your story.

Key: "The Child" (extract no. 1)

Pre-reading activity

1. ad lib.

Language

2. The author employs direct speech as a means to characterise the coloured drunk male passenger and Karen's mother. Direct speech is used in order to add more authenticity to the situations in questions. In the case of the drunk man on the subway the local colour is enhanced by making him speak directly.

3.

Definition	Word
a) A continuous shaking movement or feeling	vibrations (l. 8)
b) Special, good or unusual and therefore worth remembering or easy to remember	memorable (l. 12)
c) The outside limit of an object, a surface or an area; the part furthest from the centre	edge (l. 15)
d) Having a useful aim; determination	purposefulness (l. 18)
e) To walk with weak unsteady steps, as if you are about to fall	(to) stagger (l. 23)
f) A gate at the entrance to a public building that turns in a circle when pushed, allowing one person to go through at a time	turnstile (l. 24)
g) To make a sudden, unsteady movement forward	(to) lurch forward (l. 60)

Working with the text- Use your own words as far as possible

4. Karen appears to be left to her own devices. She probably has run away from home after a fight with her mother. Although she is about to board a subway she does not have a real destination. She is pregnant from her boyfriend called Philip.

5. a) Obviously, Karen is a very inconspicuous young woman not attracting any attention from other passengers. Her position on the platform could be called dangerous as she does not stand at the centre but rather very near to the tracks. It is suggested that the teenager does not hold on to life too much or is even in a suicidal mood because she does not care about the danger.
- b) Karen's mother seems to be a religious person and therefore considers her daughter's pregnancy to be immoral or a sin. Furthermore, she puts the blame completely on Karen without reflecting on the responsibility on Philip's part.
- c) Karen appears to have an inferiority complex as she is convinced that no one ever pays any attention to what she has to say. The "invisible thief" she thinks of emphasizes this statement and proves her somewhat childlike power of imagination.

Discussion

6. a) • Karen and Philip marry under the pressure of Karen's mother but their relationship fails to work out and a separation or divorce is the result in the long run.
- Philip makes Karen have an abortion; she agrees but suffers tremendously both physically and psychologically. Karen suffers to such an extent that she has to consult a psychologist. Philip and Karen separate.
- Karen's mother finally accepts her daughter's pregnancy and is willing to support her after the baby is born. Philip, however, turns out to act fairly irresponsibly and refuses to acknowledge his fatherhood. So, Karen and her mother are confronted with a difficult situation but prove to be able to face the challenge.

Further activities/Creative writing

7. ad lib.

Further studies and activities

8. The students will probably come up with the following ideas:
- The Declaration of Independence (1776): all men are created equal; certain unalienable rights (life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness)
 - from rags to riches
 - leading a life of self-fulfilment and self-determination
 - the mobility myth
 - self-made men
 - frontier
 - melting pot
 - land of the free

VORSCHAU

Key: Karen – a characterization

Language

I.	Words, expressions, phrases	Plausible conclusions
	"...there was nothing memorable about her." (extract no. 1, l. 12)	The protagonist Karen is described by the narrator as an average teenage girl. So she is a young woman who does not stand out from the crowd.
	"She wanted to shout and tell everyone to look at her." (extract no. 1, l. 61)	Karen craves attention from unknown people. She feels that she deserves more respect because of her pregnancy.
	"When he looked at her, she felt pretty." (extract no. 1, l. 73)	When Philip looks at her, Karen feels the way she has always wanted to. Prettiness is what she longs for.
	"Karen didn't want her child exposed to someone like him, ..." (extract no. 2, l. 12)	Although the young woman has only recently discovered that she is pregnant, she is willing to protect her unborn child.
	"She wondered if you needed white skin." (extract no. 2, l. 29)	Karen reflects on the difference of dreams between colored and white people.
	"Seventeen years from next spring, her baby would finish school for both of them. (extract no. 2, ll. 33–34)	This is a dangerous and naïve assumption on the teenager's part because her hopes and dreams will possibly not come true.
	"Well, having a baby wasn't the end of the world." (extract no. 2, l. 77)	Obviously, Karen tries to console herself and to play down the adverse situation she finds herself in.
	"Karen gazed enviously at the white girl." (extract no. 2, l. 95)	Karen would like to be in the white girl's shoes without knowing anything about the other woman. The protagonist probably assumes that the white woman is better off just because she is not Afro-American.
	"And she turned her back because she didn't want the girl to look up from the book and see her crying." (extract no. 2, ll. 106–107)	Karen is ashamed of being overwhelmed by her emotions and is too proud or timid to expose her inner life to strangers.