

# Welcome Characters



## Esme Nicoll

- Protagonist and our lens
- Life-long connection with words
- Intelligent
- Sheltered; upperclass upbringing

## Harry Nicoll

- Father to Esme
- Lexicographer
- Deep love/affection for Esme, yet
- Ill-equipped to help her navigate womanhood, and
- Represents the damaging nature of the pervasive misogyny of the time

## Ditte

- Fictionalized version of Edith Thompson
- Volunteer for the dictionary
- Esme's godmother

## Gareth Owen

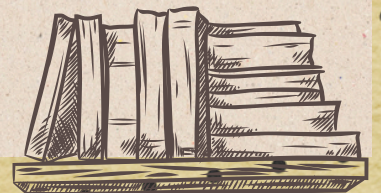
- Composer at Oxford University Press
- Esme's (eventual) husband
- Supportive and kind toward Esme; believes in her intellectual capabilities
- Composed *Women's Words* for Esme

## Lizzie Lester

- Maidservant to Dr. Murray
- Takes a quasi-maternal role in Esme's life
- Lower social class
- Forgiving, deeply religious, patient

## Tilda Taylor

- Unrestrained
- Extreme
- Actress
- Fully committed to the suffragette movement no matter the consequences (violence, etc.)



# Themes to Ponder



## Relationship Between Words and Social Hierarchy

- Lexicographers act as linguistic gatekeepers; draw entries from only their economic, racial, and cultural peers, creating a narrow view of English.
- The simplistic idea of, “..if I read every one, I’d understand the meaning of everything” (Harry) is proven false as words mean different things to different people....and....
- Many words do not find their way to the scriptorium or the dictionary (gatekeeping)
- Esme’s vocabulary grows as she befriends more people outside of her socio-economic tier (mainly words associated with women and/or the working class.

## Gender Dynamics

- Esme meets resistance of male lexicographers in the scriptorium; assigned menial tasks because of her gender
- Men have the final say in what words are published, often omitting common words that refer specifically to women’s bodies
- The suffragette movement storyline in tandem with the male dominated OED project
- Portrayal of the men who support the women in the suffragette movement as upstanding men of valor

## Class Divide

- Esme learns to read easily while Lizzie remains illiterate
- Esme is allowed time to recover from various ailments while Lizzie nurses her back to health, often dealing with similar issues herself (menstruation)
- Lizzie points out that the suffragettes actions benefit only those of higher class rank, not her
- Personal growth for Esme: *“we are not all struggling in the same way. Isn’t it true that Mrs. Pankhurst was willing to negotiate for women with property and education to get the vote, but not women like Gareth’s mother, for instance?”* (How does this shed new light on the Women’s Suffragette Movement for you?)

# Symbolism and Such



## The Scriptorium

- The scriptorium is a key setting; Esme is drawn to it and has been molded by her experiences there.....yet.....
- ..the name “scriptorium” is deceiving. It is simply an old, small garden shed - however, inside at the nucleus of the space (the sorting table), men are deciding which words should be in the OED and which words should not.
- The place where Esme discovers words and how they mean different things to different people according to class and gender bias

## Dictionary of Lost Words/Women's Words

- The published work, Women's Words honors the lost/discarded words that young Esme hid away in her treasure box
- Esme's hoarding of words in her box...an extension of her desire to rescue her mother's name (Lily) from the fire. Desire strong enough to cause severe burns to her hand

## Gareth's Printing Stamps

- Used as a way to explore class; Esme assumed it was blue-collar labor- “I felt a pang of guilt. I knew too little of what he did. I'd assumed it was nothing more than mechanical monotony.” We learn alongside Esme this is not the case.
- The trays he left behind of her book demonstrate his love for her and his respect for what she was working toward

# Let's Discuss



What are your thoughts on the evolution of the English language? How is it a good thing? How is it a bad thing?

Should the English language have gatekeepers?

The Dictionary of Lost Words explores the idea that not all words are equal. To what extent do you think this idea exists in modern English?

Do words mean the same thing to men and women?

How has the purpose of the dictionary changed?

In what ways does Lizzie exhibit wisdom?

*Should* there be “women’s words” and “men’s words” or just “words”?

What really ruffled your feathers in this book?

Can you think of examples of words that have changed meaning over time?