

# Nothing

## John Cooper Clarke

### Teachers Key

The poem by [John Cooper Clarke](#) and the animation based on it provide the teacher of English with an intriguing platform to work from. The nihilist approach which many teenagers will favour mixes richly with the philosophical and metaphysical contemplation of lack of somethingness that the poem plays with. Thus the quote from Oscar Wilde which prefaces the activity sheet, as well as the OUP dictionary definition of 'nothing' are merely reflective starting points. However, your students may like to discuss the differences in the dictionary meanings of 'nothing' which are given. Compare, for example, the meaning of 2. *Not anything* (i.e. without existence) and 5. *Trifling thing, event, remark etc....* (something exists but is dismissed as not being important)

The pre-listening activities are designed to bring the student's mind to bear on the difficulties of contemplating 'nothing' and it is more important for the student to become reflective than expect 'right' answers. The state of mind of the student is what is required here, hopefully making them more receptive to the poem and the animation which accompanies it.

#### Part One. Before Listening and Watching

1. The difficulty of the first activity lies not only in the problem of avoiding prohibited words, but in expressing the concepts themselves. Using a thesaurus might be of assistance here: *neverness; absence, blank, vacuum; emptiness; nothing; zero;* etc, or use of prefixes to positive nouns, adjectives etc e.g. *inexistence, without being, unrealized, uncreated, unmade.* Suffixes may also be used - *-less*, for example. However, more creative responses will explore metaphor, allusion and, perhaps, poetry – this is largely an exercise in subjective mental gymnastics and may result in nothing more than an exchange of ideas.
2. The representational aspects of the second activity, using still from the animation, are clearly easier to deal with than Q1 and any responses that deal intelligently with the question (what are the hands doing?) is valid. The two stills from the animation might provoke reference to 'the invisible man', and students may wish to speculate that (frame 1) something is being held and (frame 2) something is being examined. (In the film, what is being used is sign language for the deaf).

#### Part Two. After Listening and Watching

1. Note that 'nada', while meaning 'nothing' in most Latin derived languages also means (for example) 'hope' in Serbian and Croatian, and 'dew' in Arabic. It is a girl's name in a number of languages. The main objective of this activity is for the student to inject their own vocabulary into the body of the poem by accessing similar words in their own languages (or other languages they know). Part of this process is for students to sensitise themselves about the rhythm and sound of words.
2.
  - Tasteless;
  - nowhere (else) (from nowhere);
  - no one (ask: does this mean someone? Use of the double negative in English can lead to ambiguity);
  - (speculation – no right answer)
  - Nothing at all (*slang*)

3. In this activity students are asked to respond to an anti-commercialism/materialism advert (which appeared on the internet). Students should explain why they support or reject the call to join the campaign.

**The poem (for teachers reference only)**

nothing isn't anything  
it's tasteless and it's flat  
nothing if it's anything  
is even less than that  
I've got that certain nothing  
no one can do without  
the Spanish call it nada  
I call it nowt  
I'd take the train but don't care  
to travel by myself  
all the way from nowhere  
to get nowhere else  
nothing ever goes on  
nothing never ends  
say nothing to no one  
it's nothing to do with them  
nothing going on and on  
nothing wall to wall  
it happens once and then it's gone  
leaving bugger all