

ESL Reading & Grammar Worksheet

The Soap-Maker of Correggio: A Mother's Deadly Recipe

Part 1: Reading Passage

The Curse of the Fortune Teller

If you had visited the quaint Italian town of Correggio in 1939, the locals would have urged you to meet Leonarda Cianciulli. She was the town's favorite grandmother—a stout, middle-aged woman with a warm smile and a reputation for being an incredible mother. She was famous for two things: her uncanny ability to tell fortunes and her delicious, crunchy tea cakes, which she served to everyone who entered her home. But the neighbors did not know the secret ingredient in Leonarda's kitchen. They did not know that the "tea cakes" were the only thing left of their missing friends.

To understand the horror of this case, one must understand the tragedy that preceded it. Leonarda was not driven by hatred, but by a twisted, desperate form of love. In her youth, a traveling fortune teller had placed a curse on her, predicting that all her children would die young. Tragically, the prophecy seemed to come true. Leonarda had been pregnant seventeen times. Three resulted in miscarriages, and ten children died in their cribs. Only four survived.

By 1939, Leonarda was a woman driven to the brink of madness by grief and superstition. Her favorite surviving son, Giuseppe, was her entire world. So, when Giuseppe was drafted into the Italian Army to fight in World War II, something inside Leonarda snapped. She believed that the only way to keep her son safe from bullets was to offer a sacrifice to the spirits. A life for a life.

The Selection of Souls

Leonarda did not want to hurt random strangers. She needed "lonely souls"—women who were isolated, looking for escape, and wouldn't be missed immediately. As the town's trusted fortune teller, she knew exactly who they were.

Her first victim was Faustina Setti, a spinster desperate for a husband. Leonarda spun a tale that she had found Faustina a suitor in a distant city. She convinced Faustina to write letters to her family saying she was leaving and not to look for her. On the day of her departure, Faustina came to Leonarda's house for one last glass of wine. It was drugged. While she slept, Leonarda ended her life with an axe.

The Kitchen of Horrors

What happened next is a matter of police record, and it remains one of the most stomach-turning confessions in criminal history. Leonarda needed to "purify" the sacrifice to ensure her son's safety. She dismembered the body and placed the pieces into a massive copper pot used for making soap.

She added seven kilograms of Caustic Soda—an industrial chemical designed to dissolve clogs—and stirred the mixture for hours. She boiled her friend until the body dissolved into a thick, dark, gelatinous mush. She poured this mush into buckets, let it cool, and cut it into bars of "creamy" soap. She added perfume to mask the chemical smell and gifted the soap to neighbors and friends to wash their clothes.

But the ritual wasn't finished. Leonarda had kept the victim's blood. She waited for it to coagulate in a basin, then dried it in the oven and ground it into a fine red powder. She mixed this strange flour with sugar, chocolate, milk, and eggs. She kneaded the dough, baked tea cakes, and served them to visitors. As she later confessed, "I ate them myself, and I gave them to people who came to visit. Giuseppe and I also ate them."

The Audacious Defense

Leonarda repeated this process two more times. Her final victim was Virginia Cacioppo, a former opera singer whom Leonarda described as having flesh that was "fat and sweet," making for the highest quality soap. However, Virginia had a suspicious sister-in-law who had seen her enter Leonarda's house but never saw her leave.

The police raided the home. They found the victims' clothes and jewelry, but they struggled to believe the method of disposal. During the trial in 1946, the magistrates were skeptical. They did not believe a small, elderly woman could dismember and dissolve three bodies alone in such a short time. They accused her of protecting a male accomplice, perhaps her son.

Leonarda was deeply offended by their doubt. In a moment that shocked the courtroom, she shouted, "If you don't believe me, give me a body and a pot, and I'll show you right now!"

The Lingering Taste

Leonarda Cianciulli was sentenced to thirty years in prison and three years in a criminal asylum. She never showed remorse. To her dying day in 1970, she believed she was simply a good mother who had done what was necessary to protect her son.

Today, the large copper pot she used to boil her neighbors is on display at the Criminology Museum in Rome. But the true horror of this story isn't the pot; it is the realization that hit the town of Correggio years later. Hundreds of neighbors had visited her kitchen. They had washed with her soap. They had eaten her crunchy tea cakes. They realized, too late, that they hadn't

just witnessed the crime... they had consumed the evidence.

Part 2: Psychology & Vocabulary

The Psychology of Human Behavior

Concept: Magical Thinking (Superstitious Rituals)

Leonarda's behavior is a terrifying example of Magical Thinking. This is a psychological term describing the belief that one's internal thoughts, words, or rituals can influence events in the physical world that are not causally related.

While we all engage in mild magical thinking (like knocking on wood or crossing fingers), Leonarda's version was pathological, fueled by extreme trauma. After losing 13 children, she felt utterly helpless. The human brain hates helplessness. To regain a sense of control over her son Giuseppe's fate in the war, she invented a ritual: *If I give a life to the spirits, they will spare my son.*

In her mind, she wasn't a murderer; she was conducting a transaction with the universe. This delusion allowed her to compartmentalize her actions—she could be a sweet, baking grandmother in the morning and a butcher in the afternoon, because the butchery had a "higher purpose."

Key Vocabulary

- **Stout (adj.):** (of a person) somewhat fat or of heavy build. (*Synonym: Plump / Heavysset*)
- **Uncanny (adj.):** Strange or mysterious, especially in an unsettling way. (*Synonym: Eerie*)
- **Coagulate (verb):** (of a fluid, especially blood) to change to a solid or semi-solid state. (*Synonym: Clot / Congeal*)
- **Gelatinous (adj.):** Having a jelly-like consistency. (*Synonym: Goopy / Viscous*)
- **Skeptical (adj.):** Not easily convinced; having doubts or reservations. (*Synonym: Dubious*)
- **Remorse (noun):** Deep regret or guilt for a wrong committed. (*Synonym: Repentance*)
- **Prophecy (noun):** A prediction of what will happen in the future. (*Synonym: Prediction*)

Part 3: Grammar Lesson

Grammar Spotlight: The Past Perfect Tense

Quote: "In her youth, a traveling fortune teller **had placed** a curse on her... Tragically, the prophecy seemed to come true. Leonarda **had been** pregnant seventeen times."

Why is it effective here?

The Past Perfect (had + past participle) is essential in this narrative to establish the **Root Cause**.

The main story takes place in 1939 (Simple Past). However, to explain *why* Leonarda was acting this way in 1939, we have to go back even further to her youth.

- If we used Simple Past ("A fortune teller placed a curse..."), it might feel like part of the current sequence of events.
- By using Past Perfect ("had placed"), the writer pushes this event deep into the background history, marking it as the origin story that influences everything that happens later. It helps the reader understand that her trauma was old, deep, and unresolved.

Part 4: Student Exercises

Exercise 1: Vocabulary in Context

Instructions: Fill in the blanks in the following sentences using the words from the Key Vocabulary list (*Stout, Uncanny, Coagulate, Gelatinous, Skeptical, Remorse, Prophecy*). You may need to change the tense or form slightly to fit the sentence.

1. The police magistrates were highly _____ when Leonarda claimed she had disposed of three bodies all by herself in such a short amount of time.
2. The fortune teller's dark _____ cast a shadow over Leonarda's entire life, fueling her eventual descent into madness.
3. After hours of boiling with caustic soda, the mixture in the copper pot broke down into a dark, _____ substance.
4. Despite the horrific nature of her crimes, the "Soap-Maker of Correggio" showed absolutely no _____ during her trial.
5. It was practically _____ how the seemingly sweet, _____ grandmother managed to hide such a gruesome secret from her entire town.
6. She waited for the blood to _____ in the basin before drying it out to mix into her infamous tea cakes.

Exercise 2: Mastering the Past Perfect Tense

Instructions: Complete the sentences below by conjugating the verbs in parentheses. Remember the rule: use the **Past Perfect** (had + past participle) for the action that happened *first*, and the **Simple Past** for the action that happened *second*.

1. By the time the police finally _____ (raid) Leonarda's home, she _____ (already / turn) her final victim into soap.
2. Faustina _____ (write) letters to her family assuring them she was fine long before she _____ (drink) the poisoned wine.
3. The neighbors _____ (eat) the crunchy tea cakes with a smile before they later _____ (realize) the horrifying truth about the secret ingredient.
4. Because the traveling fortune teller _____ (curse) her in her youth, Leonarda _____ (believe) she had to make sacrifices to save her son.
5. Giuseppe _____ (not / know) that his mother _____ (commit) such gruesome murders just to keep him safe from the war.

Exercise 3: Reading Comprehension

Instructions: Choose the best answer for each question based on the text.

1. According to the psychological analysis in the text, what was the root cause that triggered Leonarda's "Magical Thinking"?

- A) WWII-induced schizophrenia.
- B) Trauma from losing 13 children.
- C) Jealousy of childless women.
- D) Obsession with disproving a prophecy.

2. Which of the following best describes how Leonarda compartmentalized her gruesome actions?

- A) Grief caused selective amnesia.
- B) She saw victims as evil spirits.
- C) She viewed murder as a cosmic transaction.
- D) She framed a male accomplice.

3. Why were the magistrates during the 1946 trial skeptical of Leonarda's confession?

- A) They questioned her sanity.
- B) It seemed physically impossible for an old woman.
- C) Forensic evidence didn't match.
- D) They thought the victims ran away.

4. Based on the grammatical use of the Past Perfect tense in the passage, which sequence of events is chronologically correct?

- A) Giuseppe was drafted -> the curse was placed.
- B) Magical thinking developed -> 13 children died.
- C) Multiple child losses occurred -> 1939 psychological break.
- D) Townspeople ate cakes -> bodies were dissolved.

5. How did Leonarda manipulate her first victim, Faustina Setti, into making herself an easy target?

- A) Promised an opera role.
- B) Offered exclusive tea cakes.
- C) Gave her a secret magical charm.
- D) Invented a fake marriage proposal.

6. What was the specific, scientific function of the Caustic Soda in Leonarda's "Kitchen of Horrors"?

- A) Mask the smell of decay.
- B) Dissolve bodies into mush.
- C) Dry blood for baking.
- D) Preserve the soap for months.

7. What is the ultimate, horrifying irony that the townspeople of Correggio had to face years after the crimes?

- A) Giuseppe actually helped murder them.
- B) The prophecy was completely fake.
- C) They consumed and washed with the evidence.
- D) The famous copper pot was stolen.

Teacher's Answer Key

Exercise 1: Vocabulary in Context

1. **Skeptical** (*They were doubting her claims.*)
2. **Prophecy** (*The prediction of the future.*)
3. **Gelatinous** (*The jelly-like, goopy consistency.*)
4. **Remorse** (*She felt no guilt or regret.*)
5. **Uncanny, Stout** (*It was eerie/strange how a plump, heavysset grandmother could do this.*)
6. **Coagulate** (*Waiting for the blood to clot or congeal.*)

Exercise 2: Mastering the Past Perfect Tense

1. **raided** (Simple Past) / **had already turned** (Past Perfect)
Explanation: She turned them into soap FIRST, then the police raided the home SECOND.
2. **had written** (Past Perfect) / **drank** (Simple Past)
Explanation: She wrote the letters FIRST, then drank the wine SECOND.
3. **had eaten** (Past Perfect) / **realized** (Simple Past)
Explanation: They ate the cakes FIRST, then realized the truth years later SECOND.
4. **had cursed** (Past Perfect) / **believed** (Simple Past)
Explanation: The curse happened in her youth FIRST, which caused her belief in 1939 SECOND.
5. **did not know** (Simple Past) / **had committed** (Past Perfect)
Explanation: The murders happened FIRST, and his ignorance of them was the state of affairs SECOND.

Exercise 3: Reading Comprehension

1. **B**
2. **C**
3. **B**
4. **C**
5. **D**
6. **B**

7. C