

Teacher's Guide to:

NO EASY ANSWER

Six Short Stories for Teens

by Will Weaver

Story #1 "The World in a Stump"

Introductory Activity 1: Journaling

Think about your favorite place to be alone. Once you have a strong picture of that place in your head, write a journal entry describing that place and how you feel about it, using as much detail as possible.

Introductory Activity 2: Debate

In today's world, can people find a place free from distraction? Would most people want to? What are the effects of sitting in a quiet place with no modern devices or other people to interrupt your thoughts?

Discussion Questions

Why do you think the narrator sees hunting as such a worthwhile and interesting activity? Where is that feeling coming from?

How do you feel about the narrator having the responsibility to go hunting by himself at thirteen years of age? Did you think he is responsible enough? Old enough?

Using details from the story, create a character sketch of the narrator. What do you know about him based upon his observations, his likes, his reactions to his surroundings, etc.?

Using what you know about the narrator, why is it especially hard for him to sit still all day? What obstacles does he face? What tricks does he use to succeed at his father's task?

Make a chart listing all five senses in the first column. In the second column, list one example of where that sense is appealed to in this story.

Highlight passages where you think the author uses the strongest imagery. What do you think Weaver has accomplished by using those particular images?

Discuss the story's title. What does it mean? Use examples from the story to support your answer.

Imaginative Writing

Take your introductory journaling activity and revise it into a complete essay on your favorite place to be alone. Focus on the senses you notice most and the thoughts you have when you are in that place.

Project Possibilities

Create a media representation of your ideal place (not necessarily a place you have actually been to). This can be a drawing on poster board or on the computer, a photo essay, a video essay, a song, or any media form you can think of, and post/share it to your classmates. As you create, focus on what makes that place special and how you can get other people to feel strongly about that place.

Essay Question

At the end of the story, the narrator says, “I stood to meet him and waved like a kid, though I no longer felt like one.” Write an essay discussing what the narrator means by this. Explain what has happened throughout this story that has changed him and how it has changed him.

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Story 2: “Stealing for Girls”

Introductory Activity

Before reading, have students journal on the following prompt:

How are boys and girls sports seen differently at the high school level? At the professional level? Why do you think there are differences? What are the potential outcomes of such differences? Once they have journaled, lead a class discussion on the students’ observations.

Reading Questions (short answer)

1. According to the narrator, what is the one thing a person cannot choose for himself?
2. Why is the main character upset with her brother (and her parents)?
3. What is the problem about his children’s games that the narrator’s father is faced with?
4. What does the narrator’s dad teach her before the big game?
5. What story does the family recount at the dinner table that evening?

Upper Level Reading Questions (paragraph response)

1. What are the symbolic connotations of the narrator's first name, Sunny?
2. Describe the voice of the narrator. How does it differ from other short stories you have read? How does it affect the meaning of the story as a whole?
3. Rewrite the extended metaphor (family versus food) in paragraph 4 as literal. What does it mean that there are no waiters or menus? What kind of family does each meal represent?
4. Explain the ending. Is it happy, sad, inbetween? What elements make it so?

Teacher's Guide for 1-4, plus additional literary issues.

What are the symbolic connotations of the narrator's first name, Sunny?

(She claims to have a normally sunny disposition, but we see a lot of anger, angst and self-pity from her throughout the story although she does take her complaints with a nonchalant attitude. The story of her parents' naming her does show her to be loved.)

Describe the voice of the narrator. How does it differ from other short stories you have read? How does it affect the meaning of the story as a whole?

(She writes as a teenage girl. She uses slang and informal language even though she also uses very good grammar (as explained by her English professor mother)

Rewrite the extended metaphor in paragraph 4 as literal. What does it mean that there are no waiters or menus? What kind of family does each meal represent?

(No one gives you anything, and you don't get to choose your family. Some people get great families [shrimp and steak], some people get average families (macaroni hotdish), and some people don't get much for a family at all (no food on the table).

Identify and explain the simile in paragraph 10.

(Luke is like a stroke of heat lightning. This simile shows his speed, beauty and even a bit of destructive power on the court.)

What does Sunny and Luke's staring at each other during grace symbolize?

(Their competitive natures. It is a harmless game, but it does show that there is a bit of rivalry.)

What is the mood implied by the metaphor in paragraph 129 "shoot the TV dead"?

(Sunny wastes no time in turning off the TV, and there is a bit of violence in the metaphor that shows eagerness and action.)

How does Sunny's method of learning the steal characterize her? How does she seem different from her brother here?

(When her brother teaches her stealing moves, it is all physical. Her father writes the moves down on a napkin to illustrate, but she closes her eyes to see it. She has to visualize it in her head before she can act. This shows her to be a person of thought more than of action (unlike her brother).)

What is the mood in paragraph 169 and how is it dual: “We practice until we are glowing in the chilly March morning, until an icy rain starts spattering down and the ball becomes too slick to hold”? (The atmosphere is unpleasant and chilly, but they are “glowing.” This could be with happiness, eagerness, love of the game or other positive feelings in the midst of the bitter cold.)

How does the author create suspense in the game scene? Be specific. (The author describes the game in great detail. Each move is explained but punctuated with looks to the bleachers for Sunny’s father. The fact that they are losing on the court is mirrored with her disappointment that her father isn’t there.)

How does Sunny take ownership of the game? What is the result of this? (As she is watching the game next to her coach, she murmurs that the team should go zone. The coach hears this and takes her advice. She shows herself to be immersed in the game, thoughtful, and correct.)

How do the garbage can and the sawhorse become symbols at the end of the story? (These objects are tied to her family from practice; together they are her team. Now, with her father looking on, she feels supported and loved. This gives her the strength to focus and succeed.)

Explain the ending. Is it happy, sad, indeterminate? What elements make it so? (It is generally happy with the Sunny getting attention and praise. Students may find it unexpected and/or disappointing that Sunny didn’t win her game, but it does speak to the larger theme of the piece.)

Small Group/Full Class Discussion Questions

Consider the point of view of this story. How would it change if Luke were telling the story? the mom? the dad?

Why is it important to the story that Luke is younger than Sunny? Point out instances where Luke appears to be like an older brother. Why do you suppose this is?

Fully characterize Sunny. Use specific examples that serve to add dimensions to her character.

In one complete sentence, state what you believe to be the theme of this story.

Essay Question

Write an essay that explores the theme of this story. Remember to include details such as voice, point of view, character information, etc. Be sure that your theme can be stated in a complete sentence that that it is not contradicted by any information in the story. Use specific examples to prove your theme.

Story # 3 : “Marked For Death”

Introductory Activity 1

Have a conversation with students about hunting. Are there hunters in the class? What are the rules of safety with hunting (what things do you never do with a gun)? If the class has no experienced hunters, lead a discussion on what the students believe about hunting and hunters.

Introductory Activity 2

Have students journal on the following:

How are people judged by their appearance? Consider which types of clothing are acceptable to wear and which are not. In a larger sense, why do we as a society place so much importance on how people appear?

Reading Questions (short answer)

1. At what is the main character especially skilled?
2. What assumption does the class make when they first watch Sam enter the classroom?
3. Why do the other students seem to dislike Tanner?
4. How does Tanner treat Sam after the summer class is over?
5. What does Sam's father do for a living?
6. What goes wrong with Sam's perfect trip with her father?
7. What big decision is made at the end of the story?

Reading Questions (student paragraph writing)

Scan through the opening scene in the story (the gun safety class). How is Tanner characterized? Give at least three examples of indirect characterization and the feelings those examples intend to elicit from the reader.

Consider the title of the story and the following excerpt: "If Tanner were a character in an action movie, he would be marked for death—you know, the swimmer who paddles away from the others in a shark flick, or the camper who wanders into the woods at night in a slasher film." How does this foreshadow the ending of the story?

Why do you think the gun safety instructor spends so much time on the gruesome photos of shooting accident victims? What is the effect of the author's spending so much time on it?

How are the other students characterized in this story? Give two examples from the text to support your opinion.

On the first day of school, Sam worries about her clothing and then about Tanner's attention to her. How does this characterize her, and how does this show depth of characterization?

How does the author create sympathy for Tanner in the middle of the story (after the class but before the hunting trip)? What is the effect of that sympathy?

In paragraph 95, Sam describes Tanner as being "like a wood tick. Like a leach. Like a lamprey." Identify this figure of speech and explain its meaning.

When Tanner first meets her father, Sam harshly tells him to "Go away!" Why does she do this? Why is she angry at this point?

Re-read paragraph 155 (starting with "Tanner raced up the double-wide.") What is the significance that Tanner stops to knock on the door and then changes his mind and just walks in? How does this further characterize Tanner?

Identify three or four instances of foreshadowing during the hunting trip. What do those excerpts foreshadow? Who is potentially in danger?

How is the foreshadowing to the shooting actually a misdirection? What is the reader led to believe and what actually happens?

How is Tanner's funeral offensive to Sam? How has she changed from the beginning of the story? What caused this change and is it believable based upon what you know about her character?

Re-read the last paragraph. What sentence in this paragraph could be a good clue to the theme of the story?

Reading Guide (teacher)

Scan through the opening scene in the story (the gun safety class). How is Tanner characterized? Give at least three examples of indirect characterization and the feelings those examples intend to elicit from the reader.

(He has acne. He is initially boastful about guns. He speaks at inappropriate times and says inappropriate things. The other students largely ignore him. He wants to show off and receive attention. He tries to appear not upset by the graphic photos, yet the narrator notices his jaw dropping even lower. As he leaves, the narrator notices the worn out, run down condition of his bicycle. All of these serve to show him as awkward, socially inept, and poor.)

Consider the title of the story and the following excerpt: "If Tanner were a character in an action movie, he would be marked for death—you know, the swimmer who paddles away from the others in a shark flick, or the camper who wanders into the woods at night in a slasher film." How does this foreshadow the ending of the story?

(Careful readers will notice from the beginning that Tanner must be the one to die, since from the beginning he is “Marked for Death.”)

Why do you think the gun safety instructor spends so much time on the gruesome photos of shooting accident victims? What is the effect of the author’s spending so much time on it?

(The instructor obviously wants to drive home the point that handling a gun is dangerous. The author may be foreshadowing the terrible results of inattention and accidental violence.)

How are the other students characterized in this story? Give two examples from the text to support your opinion.

(The other boys in the gun safety class are eager to see Tanner get hurt. At the funeral, Sam’s friends are flippant about the seriousness of the event; they giggle at other mourners.)

On the first day of school, Sam worries about her clothing and then about Tanner’s attention to her. How does this characterize her, and how does this show depth of characterization?

(This shows that Sam, too, is concerned about appearance. She wants to fit in even as she mocks her fellow students to herself (even once calling some popular girls Mary Kate and Ashley).

How does the author create sympathy for Tanner in the middle of the story (after the class but before the hunting trip)? What is the effect of that sympathy?

(He is eager for Sam’s attention. He is unusually honest with her about his mother and living conditions, which are unfortunate. Sam tells us that he is labeled as one of the “consonant kid[s].” Sam’s father gently reprimands her for being unkind. On the morning of the hunting trip, he is so eager to go that the implication is he had been waiting outside in the cold for a very long time. All of these serve to make the reader pity Tanner rather than be annoyed by him. It also causes Sam to feel some pity as well and introduces a bit of change in her character.)

In paragraph 95, Sam describes Tanner as being “like a wood tick. Like a leach. Like a lamprey.” Identify this figure of speech and explain its meaning.

(Simile. Sam feels as if Tanner is sucking all the good parts of her life away from her.)

When Tanner first meets her father, Sam harshly tells him to “Go away!” Why does she do this? Why is she angry at this point?

(Sam misses her father terribly, and she wants him all to herself. She isn’t as upset about Tanner encroaching upon her school life as she is her time with her father.)

Re-read paragraph 155 (starting with “Tanner raced up the double-wide.”) What is the significance that Tanner stops to knock on the door and then changes his mind and just walks in? How does this further characterize Tanner?

(This characterizes Tanner as someone who does not feel like his house is a home. We know from details in the story that he has moved between foster homes and probably isn’t well loved.)

Identify three or four instances of foreshadowing during the hunting trip. What do those excerpts foreshadow? Who is potentially in danger?

(Sam feels clenching in her stomach. She sucks in her breath. She tells her father to be careful more than once. All of these foreshadow that she is worried something will happen to her father.)

How is the foreshadowing to the shooting actually a misdirection? What is the reader led to believe and what actually happens?

(Sam is worried about her father which leads the reader to worry about her father. The reader expects until the final reveal that Tanner has shot Sam's father, so Tanner bleeding is a surprise.)

How is Tanner's funeral offensive to Sam? How has she changed from the beginning of the story? What caused this change and is it believable based upon what you know about her character?

(She finds her fellow students disrespectful. She learns the truth that people say meaningless things at funerals for small comfort. Sam has seen death and it has changed her greatly, especially since she began the story as a relatively caring person (although annoyed with Tanner). Her change is completely in keeping with her previous actions and thoughts.)

Re-read the last paragraph. What sentence in this paragraph could be a good clue to the theme of the story? Why?

("There's an art to handholding, even if it's with your dad; someone has to let go first, but tonight neither of us were in any hurry." Sam and her father have had an emotional experience together and it has changed them both. They are now relying upon each other for comfort, and even though Sam is growing up, they are both content with their closeness and connection to each other.)

Discussion Questions

What is the theme of this story?

What is the major conflict? What is the minor conflict?

What is the point of view of the story, and how does it affect how the reader sees Tanner at the beginning and then at the end?

What effect does the use of foreshadowing have on the suspense of the story?

How is the main character similar to and yet different from the rest of the students she encounters?

How does the family dynamic in this story serve to further characterize Sam and explain some of her behavior?

Story # 4 "Up The River"

Introductory activity

Have student research addiction and the symptoms (physical and psychological) of it.

Reading Questions (short answer version)

What activity does Seth use as a cover for his gambling?

What kind of student is Seth?

What does Seth think of the boys he plays poker with after school?

What about the atmosphere does Seth enjoy about online poker as opposed to poker in a room with other people?

Why does Seth begin playing as two different people online?

From whom does Seth steal an identity to continue playing poker online?

How does Seth manage to pay off the balance on his credit card?

What finally happens to his poker accounts due to his cheating?

What does Seth almost do when he talks to his mother at the end of the story?

While Seth tries to sleep, what does he imagine doing?

Reading Questions (short answer answers)

What activity does Seth use as a cover for his gambling?

Math-Calculus

What kind of student is Seth?

A good student, junior class president

What does Seth think of the boys he plays poker with after school?

They are oafs, they smell bad, they are small time

What about the atmosphere does Seth enjoy about online poker as opposed to poker in a room with other people?

It is much cleaner/purer

Why does Seth begin playing as two different people online?

He needs a way to make the money he lost back/cheating

From whom does Seth steal an identity to continue playing poker online?

His grandmother, Sarah Parker

How does Seth manage to pay off the balance on his credit card?

He steals his grandmother's credit card checks

What finally happens to his poker accounts due to his cheating?

They are simultaneously blocked

What does Seth *almost* do when he talks to his mother at the end of the story?

Confess everything

While Seth tries to sleep, what does he imagine doing?
 Playing more hands of poker and winning

Reading Guide (student)

How does Seth's feelings about his parents reflect upon his own character?

Explain how Seth's experiences in school and his feelings about his male classmates give clues as to his reasons for creating an online persona.

Discuss Seth's feelings about his male classmates and their brand of poker. What do Seth's feelings reveal about his own character?

Re-read the section on Seth's opinion of online poker playing. What about online poker appeals to Seth? Why do you suppose these specifics appeal to him?

Find two or three examples of Seth's growing dependence upon gambling. What physical attributes reveal his emotional addiction?

While playing poker with classmates in the locker room, Seth thinks to himself: "What he should have done was sit back and wait for some really good cards, but winning was not what he wanted. If he won, these guys would take it out on him in some other way, possibly involving blood and fractured bones. So Seth kept right on playing like an idiot, making sure to lose it all toward the end." What does this passage reveal about both Seth and the others with whom he is playing?

Characterize Riverboy. Compare and contrast this persona to other characters in the story.

Characterize Muscebound. Compare and contrast this persona to other characters in the story.

How does Seth's splitting his own character into two online personas show his own duality of character?

Review the following excerpt: "Havenwood and three wings outside, and an overly clean smell inside. Like exploded air fresheners. Air fresheners gone wild. What smells they were covering up, he didn't want to know." How is the smell of air freshener a metaphor in this story?

Review the information revealed during Seth's visit with his grandmother. How does the information presented and his reactions during the conversation further serve to characterize Seth?

Based upon the ending of the story and the thoughts Seth goes through after not confessing to his mother, what can you infer about his future?

How is Seth an unreliable narrator?

Reading Guide (teacher)

How does Seth's feelings about his parents reflect upon his own character?

- He seems to be similar to his mother (a night owl), and therefore, connects with her more comfortably.

He chastises himself for not noticing that she dyes the grey out of her hair, which may lead the reader to think he doesn't like her getting old, or that he is merely upset that he didn't notice it—and he thinks he notices everything. His seeming dislike of his father may be simply a disconnect, but also may show that he has very little guidance in his life and is left to make poor choices on his own.

Explain how Seth's experiences in school and his feelings about his male classmates give clues as to his reasons for creating an online persona.

- He sees his male classmates as a scourge and danger to him, but he also looks down on them for their simplicity. He believes himself to be better than they, and his playing online for higher stakes supports that.

Discuss Seth's feelings about his male classmates and their brand of poker. What do Seth's feelings reveal about his own character?

- Seth's sense of superiority definitely cases him to see all his classmates as lesser than he; he even looks down on college guys and their brand of poker. Because he sees himself as better than all of them, he doesn't seem to even consider the possibility that what he is doing in his addiction could be dangerous.

Re-read the section on Seth's opinion of online poker playing. What about online poker appeals to Seth? Why do you suppose these specifics appeal to him?

- Seth appreciates the isolation and cleanliness/purity of online poker. He does not want to deal with flesh-and-blood people, seeing them as dirty and beneath them. He comments several times throughout the story on the filth and smell of playing poker with others in person.

Find two or three examples of Seth's growing dependence upon gambling. What physical attributes reveal his emotional addiction?

- More than once, Seth refers to the sounds of poker (the shuffling, dealing, etc.) in a positive way as if the sound is a comfort to him. He often becomes flushed or pale, and sweaty or cold when gambling. He is jumping when his parents or grandmother mention phone calls about poker, but doesn't seem to take them too seriously. Although he feels guilty about using his grandmother, he continues to use her identity to cheat at poker ("something inside Seth shriveled up...But not all the way")

While playing poker with classmates in the locker room, Seth thinks to himself: "What he should have done was sit back and wait for some really good cards, but winning wan not what he wanted. If he won, these guys would take it out on him in some other way, possibly involving blood and fractured bones. So Seth kept right on playing like an idiot, making sure to lose it all toward the end." What does this passage reveal about both Seth and the others with whom he is playing?

- Seth has put himself in a situation he believes could be dangerous if he stands out as a good poker player. He offers excuses for playing recklessly and losing. It could be that his fear of being bullied has driven him to seek comfort in online gambling.

Characterize Riverboy. Compare and contrast this persona to other characters in the story.

- Riverboy is very much like Seth himself. He seems clean-cut and intelligent. Riverboy could be what Seth aspires to be.

Characterize Musclebound. Compare and contrast this persona to other characters in the story.

- Musclebound is oafish and unintelligent. He is what Seth sees in the boys from school and quite possible what Seth would fear to become.

How does Seth's splitting his own character into two online personas show his own duality of character?

- Throughout the story, Seth is balancing two distinct characters in real life. He seems like a good student, junior class president, devoted son and grandson all while living a hidden life of gambling, increasing debt and theft.

Review the following excerpt: "Havenwood and three wings outside, and an overly clean smell inside. Like exploded air fresheners. Air fresheners gone wild. What smells they were covering up, he didn't want to know." How is the smell of air freshener a metaphor in this story?

- The scent of air fresheners at Havenwood, his grandmother's residence, could relate directly to Seth's life. He seems like the perfect son and grandson, but all that acting is covering the decay of gambling addiction underneath. It may also hint at Seth's desire to be seen for what he really is and his frustration that no one in his life bothers to smell past the air freshener.

Review the information revealed during Seth's visit with his grandmother. How does the information presented and his reactions during the conversation further serve to characterize Seth?

- Seth had not realized that his grandmother kept track of his visits. He has physical reactions from the fear of getting caught, but believes that his grandmother doesn't notice his symptoms. He feels guilty about stealing from her, but he rationalizes his actions. Seth is completely in the grasp of addiction, but cannot see that in himself.

Based upon the ending of the story and the thoughts Seth goes through after not confessing to his mother, what can you infer about his future?

- Seth uses the same terminology for his brain working as he does for the shuffling and dealing of cards. He considers going to a horse racing track to make more money. He falls asleep thinking of winning hand after hand of poker. Seth still refuses to see his addiction, and he will most likely continue incurring debt and lying to his family.

How is Seth an unreliable narrator?

- Seth doesn't seem to realize that the people around him are worried and a bit suspicious. He believes that he has everyone (boys at school, mother, grandmother) fooled about his activities. He doesn't see the real harm that he is likely causes for his grandmother. He becomes frightened at the thought of being found out (phone calls about poker), but then he moves on and forgets about them as soon as he thinks about more gambling. Seth is in the throes of gambling addiction, but cannot see it for what it is (or at least he chooses to ignore it).

Discussion Questions

Based upon the ideas of masks and duality, what could be a possible theme for this story?

Discuss another possible theme for this story considering point of view and the unreliable narrator.

Explore Seth's relationships with his mother and his father. What do you make of the thoughts he has of them and of his own actions.

Contrast Seth's own characteristics of innocence and those of his maturity. What do they mean for his character?

Essay Question

Explore how Seth is an unreliable narrator. When does he reveal information the reader knows to be false or at least skewed? How does the fact that he is an unreliable narrator affect the reader's recognition of his gambling addiction?

Story # 5: "Bootleg Summer"

Introductory Activity: Have students research the 1920s: bootlegging, the Volstead Act, culture, slang, etc. This project should be student-driven with the goal of learning more about the time period and the culture that came out of Prohibition of alcohol.

Reading Guide (student)

Read through the first paragraph of the story; what specific images contribute to tone and how the main character (the kid) sees himself?

Describe the setting of this story and how it affects the kid's choices.

Find three examples of dialect or colloquialism in this story. Next, explain how the use of dialect affects the reading of the story.

The kid says, "My father raised hogs, and to me they never stunk until this year." What does this metaphor mean?

The kid reports that his mother said that "the kerosene lamp in our living room cast a mighty small circle of light." The salesman and the kid discuss that they don't really know what she meant. What is the meaning of this statement, and why did it make the kid's father stop and think for a bit?

When the kid first dons the uniform of the PureOil station, he wanted to go on and on in his storytelling about the uniform. Why is this? What does the uniform symbolize for him?

Re-read the passage where the kid describes his first look at Kid Cann's car. What do you think the car symbolizes for him?

In the paragraph where the kid first sees Kid Cann, find the example of personification and explain how it works in the story.

Compare and contrast the smell the kid complains about on his father's farm to the smell he notices when Kid Cann comes near him. What do the two smells represent?

How does the kid's description of patching Kid Cann's tire parallel his storytelling to the salesman?

When he is describing the patching of the tire, the kid says he feels like a doctor or a scientist while he works. How does this characterize the kid?

The kid says that he likes the lighting of a match: "I like that part, how the flame flares up yellow, then dies down to a low blue flicker..." How does this statement contribute to the theme of the story?

What does the kid explain as the reason for wanting to save up extra money? How does this desire contribute to the theme based upon the American Dream?

Explain what inference the reader can make about the following excerpts:

"I didn't say that the Model A's—the trucks in particular—smelled kind of strong in back, like green silage juice or sour corn mash for the hogs. But maybe it was viegar, too, or turpentine, I told myself."

"Course it all depends on what you think about prohibition, I guess, don't it?" the salesman says"

"There was even a cake with my name on it, and jazz music on a Victrola record player plus a champagne toast—apple cider for me, because Mr. Langenfeld didn't want me learn any bad habits."

What do you suppose is the author's implication in the salesman transporting bootlegged booze and the policeman who stops him taking the bribe? How does this contribute to a possible theme?

After the boy lies for his driver, he becomes angry at the idea of being paid off. Why? How has the kid changed through his experiences?

What may be the metaphorical meaning behind the kid's first drink of alcohol being "the vilest stuff I'd ever tasted" and being unable to swallow it?

Reading Guide (teacher)

Read through the first paragraph of the story; what specific images contribute to tone and how the main character (the kid) sees himself?

- The kid describes dead bugs and a snake alongside the road—dried up and hollow. This is a direct parallel to how the kid feels now that he has betrayed a man he admired.

Describe the setting of this story and how it affects the kid's choices.

The kid comes from a farm with no electricity, even though the nearby town is starting to get it. •He wants more for himself and his family. He has finally noticed that he is different from the "town kids" and sees himself as less than he did before. It is the 1920s, and people all over the country are becoming wealthy through criminal activity, and although he doesn't want to actually be a criminal, he admires the wealth.

Find three examples of dialect or colloquialism in this story. Next, explain how the use of dialect affects the reading of the story.

- Colloquialisms are peppered throughout the dialogue. Examples of 1920s slang are: “on the lam,” “saw buck,” “23 Skidoo,” and these are contrasted with more rural sayings such as: “frost in July,” “teats on a boar,” “bumblebee through a pumpkin patch on Fourth of July.” This contrast sets the scene as the 1920s in a rural area, but on a larger scale serves to highlight the contrast between the country life the kid wants to leave behind and the fast-paced world of wealth he wants to enter.

The kid says, “My father raised hogs, and to me they never stunk until this year.” What does this metaphor mean?

- Once he is faced with the town kids, the kid realizes that they look down on him. He smells like the hogs, but never realized that was a negative thing to some people until then.

The kid reports that his mother said that “the kerosene lamp in our living room cast a mighty small circle of light.” The salesman and the kid discuss that they don’t really know what she meant. What is the meaning of this statement, and why did it make the kid’s father stop and think for a bit?

- This scene shows the kid’s naiveté while showing his parents as wise. He does not understand that his parents know the kid will want to move on to greater things than his father’s farm. They know (even if the kid doesn’t yet) that he will have to experience the world for himself and decide his own path.

When the kid first dons the uniform of the PureOil station, he wanted to go on and on in his storytelling about the uniform. Why is this? What does the uniform symbolize for him?

- The kid takes great pride in his appearance and his work (as evidenced by how clean he keeps his work area). This serves to characterize him as a hard worker as well as a dreamer. To him, the uniform is a symbol of moving on to better things and being on his way up.

Re-read the passage where the kid describes his first look at Kid Cann’s car. What do you think the car symbolizes for him?

- The car is utterly impressive. It has huge head-lanterns, a hood as big as a boat deck, and even curtains in the back window. The kid had never seen a car like it in real life, and is so impressed with it that he has a hard time doing his job because of his nervous shaking. This car symbolizes everything he wants to have and everything he wants to be.

In the paragraph where the kid first sees Kid Cann, find the example of personification and explain how it works in the story.

- The kid first sees Kid Cann’s shoes as “the man’s shoes come out—leather shined black as oiled walnut.” The man Kid Cann is so impressive that he cannot be described in total—even his shoes are impressive enough to warrant careful consideration.

Compare and contrast the smell the kid complains about on his father’s farm to the smell he notices when Kid Cann comes near him. What do the two smells represent?

- The pleasant smell of Kid Cann directly contrasts the unpleasant smell of his father’s hog farm. Kid Cann smells of mint or cologne, which is exotic to the kid.

How does the kid’s description of patching Kid Cann’s tire parallel his storytelling to the salesman?

- The kid is very careful and deliberate when telling of how he patched the tire. He tells the larger story in

the same way. Each detail is revealed only when he wants to reveal it. This story is so important to the kid and explaining why he did as he did, that he must take his time and tell it all in the right order.

When he is describing the patching of the tire, the kid says he feels like a doctor or a scientist while he works. How does this characterize the kid?

- This passage also shows how much pride the kid takes in his work. He will never do less than as much as he can to do a perfect job.

The kid says that he likes the lighting of a match: “I like that part, how the flame flares up yellow, then dies down to a low blue flicker...” How does this statement contribute to the theme of the story?

- The kid’s yearning for wealth and the kind of life he sees Kid Cann have drives his actions in this story. He claims to believe in judging people only by what he sees in them, but he also wants a bit of that bright, hot-burning flame of adventure and wealth in his life, even if it won’t last long.

What does the kid explain as the reason for wanting to save up extra money? How does this desire contribute to the theme based upon the American Dream?

- He wants to bring electricity out to his parents’ farm. This is an example of how he believes his hard work and taking on extra tasks will lead to success and wealth. This is the American Dream, even if the kid has to participate in an organization that engages in illegal activities.

Explain what inference the reader can make about the following excerpts:

“I didn’t say that the Model A’s—the trucks in particular—smelled kind of strong in back, like green silage juice or sour corn mash for the hogs. But maybe it was vinegar, too, or turpentine, I told myself.”

- Here the kid hints that he actually knows exactly what those trucks carry, but he wants to convince himself that he may be mistaken. He wants to keep the job, he enjoys it, so he tells himself that it could be vinegar or turpentine instead of bootlegged booze.

“Course it all depends on what you think about prohibition, I guess, don’t it?” the salesman says”

- Here the salesman is testing the waters on the kid’s own beliefs on Prohibition; the reader can infer from this that the salesman isn’t a typical traveling salesman, but a transporter of alcohol.

“There was even a cake with my name on it, and jazz music on a Victrola record player plus a champagne toast—apple cider for me, because Mr. Langenfeld didn’t want me learn any bad habits.”

- From this passage, the reader can infer that Mr. Langenfeld most certainly had his good points. He knows that what he does is not necessarily good, and he doesn’t really want the kid to get caught up in it.

What do you suppose is the author’s implication in the salesman transporting bootlegged booze and the policeman who stops him taking the bribe? How does this contribute to a possible theme?

- This could lead the reader to two conclusions. Either the author intends that Prohibition was a bad idea since it turned a lot of good people into criminals, or it could lead to the theme that everyone has a little bad in them and could be bought for a price (just as the kid was willing to be bought for the possibility of electricity to his parents house).

After the boy lies for his driver, he becomes angry at the idea of being paid off. Why? How has the kid changed through his experiences?

- The kid sees lying and criminal activity as a dark path to travel down. He also may see himself in all of

the unsavory activity he has witnessed. He has essentially taken bribes from both sides (the criminal and the law), and that reflection of himself makes him angry.

What may be the metaphorical meaning behind the kid's first drink of alcohol being "the vilest stuff I'd ever tasted" and being unable to swallow it?

- His first taste of real life was too difficult to swallow. He doesn't want anything to do with the lies and betrayal and symbolically spits out all of those things he has come to hate. He is done with a society that produces situations like the one in which he participated.

Discussion questions

Fully discuss the conflict in this story. Who is the protagonist and who/what is he fighting against? Why is this conflict the central one?

What is the theme of this story?

How does this story take the theme of the American Dream and twist it?

In what ways is this narrator unreliable? Why can the reader not completely trust everything he tells his companion or even everything he thinks to himself?

Fully characterize the kid. What motivates or drives him? What does he hope or expect to achieve from working for Kid Cann Langenfeld? What happens to the kid when his dreams do not materialize?

Essay Questions

1. Write an essay that explores the character development of "the kid." What are his motivations at the beginning of the story? How do those motivations change? Does "corruption" (dishonesty by adults) factor in? Why does he feel so guilty about betraying a gangster? You may also consider any parallels you see between the kid and Kid Cann Langenfeld.

2. Find and read Sherwood Anderson's story, "I Why To Know Why." * Compare and contrast it to Mr. Weaver's story, "Bootleg Summer." By writing a story so similar in style and tone, is Mr. Weaver "cheating" (plagiarizing)? Make a case one way or the other (yes or no).

*Warning: Anderson's story contains the "N" word early on. However, the story itself comes to focus on racial injustice, when the narrator's eyes are opened to it. Written in the 1920's, this puts Sherwood Anderson way out front in even talking about racial discrimination.

Story #6: “WWJD”

Introductory Activity 1

Have student journal on the following prompt:

Consider how perception affects behavior. How does the way you see others affect the way you act towards them? How does life experience affect the way a person interacts with others? What things do you think are normal that others see as unusual? Have these differences affected information you reveal to those around you?

Once they have journaled, lead a class discussion on the students’ observations.

Introductory Activity 2

Play the song “Suzanne” by Leonard Cohen while displaying the lyrics for your students.

Offer the following journal prompt: How can you characterize Suzanne based upon this song? Why do you suppose the songwriter includes the verse about Jesus in this song? What is the relationship between Suzanne, Jesus, and the subject of this song?

While you play the song again, have the students journal on the above questions, then discuss what they have written.

Remind the students to keep this song in mind as they read the short story “WWJD.”

Reading Guide (teacher)

With whom does our main character, Suzy, identify? Why do you think this is so?

- Jesus. Student answers will vary, but some may comment that she is tormented and suffers like Jesus, that she sees evil in the world around and wants to change it, or that she seems to love absolutely those around her and seeks to forgive them all.

When Suzy admits that she feels out of place, what does the school counselor suggest?

- The counselor suggests that she visit a psychiatrist

When Suzy visits a doctor, what is that doctor's solution to Suzy's feelings of alienation? What are the effects of this solution?

- He quickly prescribes a drug, Tazamix, which appears to make the world seem bigger, sharper, and perhaps more violent.

Describe the encounter between Suzy and Eddie in paragraphs 15-20.

- Eddie throws a can of Mountain Dew at Suzy and burns her cheek by flicking a lit cigarette butt at her. She takes some of the ash from her cheek and transfers it to her forehead.

Why does Suzy refuse to fill out a harassment report against Eddie?

- She has forgiven him. Later she tells him that he will have nowhere to go if she gets him kicked out of school.

How does Suzy convince the school nurse, Ms. Jones, to not wipe the ashes off of her forehead?

- She invokes her religious rights claiming that it is a symbol.

List three or four concerns the adults at Suzy's school have about her.

- She is not adjusting well to the move to Wisconsin. She is anxious. She does not appear to be taking care of herself. She does not appear to be well-liked by any other students. She is trying too hard to be like Jesus in forgiving Eddie. They are unsure that her aunt is around as much as would be advisable.

Describe both Suzy's mother and aunt based upon what Suzy thinks about them.

- Suzy's mother is in prison, but we do not know why. It seems as if she has been largely absent from Suzy's life. Aunt Jean works the nightshift and has Suzy stay at her home, but she does not seem like a very good parent figure. Suzy eats pie several times a day, even taking it to school with her for lunch. Aunt Jean is also absent from meetings Suzy has with adults at school or doctors.

Describe how Suzy feels about the black swan she is making in woodworking class.

- In paragraph 105, Suzy describes to the readers how hard she has worked on the swan. She is doing everything by hand because she doesn't like machines. The swan reminds her of Eddie, and in fact, represents Eddie later in the story. Suzy works hard to make the swan as smooth as possible and delights in the true grain of the wood coming out during the process.

What happens to Suzy's black swan? Why do you suppose it happens?

- Someone, presumably Eddie, has cut her swan into many pieces, destroying it beyond repair. Answers for why may vary, but students may say that Eddie simply wants to destroy anything Suzy loves, or that he likes to see her suffer. Others may comment that Eddie is so uncomfortable with Suzy's demeanor that he wants to see how far he can push her. Still others may sympathize with Eddie and his physical and social difficulties and his inability to act appropriately.

How does Suzy convince Eddie to walk out onto the frozen river? Why do you think she is able to convince him?

- She tells him not to be afraid. Students may think that Eddie really does want to be saved by Suzy, and that he may be on the verge of a turning point to accepting her. Others may think that he doesn't want to be seen as a coward by his friends.

Write two or three sentences on whether or not you think Suzy's act of watching Eddie struggle in the river is her offering salvation or wreaking vengeance.

Answers for this question will vary widely and should be good fodder for class discussion.

Discussion Questions

For the following questions, remember to always use specific examples from the text to complete your answers.

Isn't Suzy right about many things? Things that the adults just aren't getting? Identify a couple of examples where what she says is, in the best of all worlds, totally true.

Find and comment on three allusions used in this story. Remember to completely describe how they are used and their effect on the story as a whole.

Why do you think Suzy spends her mornings picking up trash outside of the school?

What is the role of adults in this story? Use three different adults in Suzy's life and explain why you think the author chose to portray them as such.

Re-read paragraph twelve. Comment on the use of metaphor in this paragraph as well as the effect of those particular metaphors. Explain what Suzy's life was like before and after taking Tazamix.

From whose point of view is this story told? What is the effect of using this particular point of view? How would the meaning of the story change if the point of view was told from the omniscient point of view or from another character's point of view?

Characterize Eddie. Remember to use physical as well as behavioral traits. Make especial effort to use clues from the text that show Eddie as a rounded character rather than a flat one.

Comment on the importance of Suzy's black swan. Include information on how she describes it, and for what it may be a symbol both in the story and on a universal level.

What effect do you suppose Suzy's constant forgiveness has on Eddie?

Suzy's orange scarf is mentioned several times throughout the story; what may it symbolize? Remember to use proof from the text to support your answer.

Comment on the seemingly incongruously positive imagery in paragraph 167 of Eddie's arms flapping "like a bird taking off."

Considering many examples from the text including word choice, imagery, symbolism, etc, what do you suppose is the theme of this story? Be specific, and make sure that your theme is supported fully by the text.

Essay Question

Using evidence from the text and considering literary elements such as characterization, allusion, point of view, setting, etc, write an essay where you analyze whether Suzy is providing salvation for Eddie at the end of the story or if she has given in to a need for vengeance. Or, finally, is starting to understand that she has to live in the "real world?" Remember to support your view completely and clearly.

Story # 7 “Bad Blood” (General Guide: can be used as a unit test after close reading of the other stories)

Short Answer: answer each of the following questions thoroughly with support from the text.

Characterize Jared Righetti with examples from the text; what kind of kid is he?

Characterize both of Jared’s parents through his descriptions of them.

Describe the type of conflict in this story and explain your answer.

How does setting affect the meaning of this story?

Explain how the ideas of family history and tradition affect Jared and his journey in this story.

Find examples throughout the story of how Jared begins changing through his relationship with Mrs. Anderson.

Explain how the car Jared finds is a symbol in the story. Use examples from the text to support your answer.

How does the idea of the American Dream play a role in this story?

Give your opinion as to whether or not you believe Jared to have changed by the end of the story. Use specific examples from the text to support your answer.

Essay: answer the following question in a short essay of three to four paragraphs.

Re-read the three dreams Jared has toward the end of the story. What does each dream symbolize and how do the dreams work together to create meaning for the story?

(Curriculum for *No Easy Answer* was written by Minnesota English teachers)

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