

Teaching “Falling Out of Downey”

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Before Reading:

Teaching genres. It can be helpful to discuss the difference between science fiction and fantasy. One useful distinction is that science fiction stories contain an element or elements that do not exist in our world but are scientifically possible. Fantasy stories contain an element or elements that do not exist on our world and do not appear scientifically possible. Space ships that travel to other planets are scientifically possible while magic is not. A class exercise that can be done quickly is to have the students create a list of films they are familiar with and classify them as science fiction or fantasy. You may find a spirited debate about films that straddle the line, like some of the Marvel Comics films that contain some elements that appear science fictional and some that are supernatural. After reading, students can decide if “Falling Out of Downey” is a science fiction or fantasy.

Discussing themes: An approach that can get the students involved with the story is to discuss or have students journal on some of the story’s elements or thematic topics before they read. Some questions that can be fruitful include these:

- Imagine you are an alien who has started watching the Earth’s television news for the first time. If the news was the alien’s only source of information about humanity, what conclusions might the alien come to?
- Describe your favorite place. It could be a town you lived in, a vacation spot, a room in your house, etc. What makes this your favorite place?
- Have you ever been bullied? What did you do to protect yourself?
- If you were given a chance to live in a place on Earth where none of the bad news you hear about existed, would you go?

Introducing vocabulary: One approach to vocabulary is to ask students to note words they either are unfamiliar with or find interesting as they read. Asking student to find ten words that fall into those two categories can help them focus more closely on the text.

Another approach is to identify words in the story you believe might trip students up and pre-teach them. The vocabulary in “The Lies” should not be difficult for an average middle or high school student. Words for students with weaker vocabulary who may need extra support include the following:

- Retrospect
- Victorian cottage
- Trust fund
- Banshee
- Deranged
- Adrenaline
- Knights of Pythias

“Falling Out of Downey” Quiz

Name _____

- 1) What clue tips the paperboy that he is no longer in Downey?
- 2) How does a person get into Downey?
- 3) How does the paperboy know about the world outside of Downey?
- 4) Who is Trianna and why is she important in the story?
- 5) Besides being difficult to get to, what else is unusual about Downey?
- 6) Why do the two other paperboys decide to beat up the paperboy from Downey?
- 7) How does the paperboy get back home?
- 8) Would you want to live in Downey? Why or why not?

“Falling Out of Downey” Quiz Key

- 1) What clue tips the paperboy that he is no longer in Downey? *The geography of the valley is the same, and there is a highway like he is used to seeing, but none of the houses are the same.*
- 2) How does a person get into Downey? *People get to Downey by being in the right state of mind. Some readers might suggest that when a person isn't closely connected to the “real” world, like when they are daydreaming, they are able to get to Downey. Later in the story, the paperboy says that he and Trianna like to people watch the “time-shifted” strangers who come through town. He identifies them as like “most everyone else in the world who slip out of their time and place occasionally.”*
- 3) How does the paperboy know about the world outside of Downey? *Downey appears to have a loose and inconsistent connection with the rest of the world. The paperboy says he watches CNN and looks at the Internet to find out about the outside world.*
- 4) Who is Trianna and why is she important in the story? *Trianna is a girl whom the paperboy likes. He's supposed to go over to her house that evening to “hang out.” He's worried that if he's not there she might spend time with another boy, Bob Castile, who the paperboy thinks is a creep.*
- 5) Besides being difficult to get to, what else is unusual about Downey? *Some of the citizens are supernatural. The paperboy has vampires and werewolves as customers. Also, the dead subscribe to the newspaper. Beyond that, the weather and mood of the town sounds brighter or more rich than the world outside of Downey.*
- 6) Why do the two other paperboys decide to beat up the paperboy from Downey? *There doesn't seem to be a direct cause for the paperboys to chase the boy from Downey. He doesn't provoke them. The best answer would be that the paperboys feel territorial. They don't like someone who is in their town who carries papers that are not theirs.*
- 7) How does the paperboy get back home? *He does a familiar activity, which is delivering papers in the cemetery. Throwing papers at the graves just like he normally would do helps get him back into the state of mind necessary to transport him back to his home.*
- 8) Would you want to live in Downey? Why or why not? *There are many ways to answer this question. Some students might argue that Downey is not “reality,” so they would not want to be there. It is magically safe. The town might sound boring to them. Some students might not like the town because it is small. Others might argue that they would want to live there because many of the world's ills do not seem to touch them. Downey does not have problems with drugs or illness or war.*

“Falling Out of Downey”

Post-reading Activities

One of the most productive ways to approach a discussion of literature is to give students the chance to respond to the story as readers first and as students of literature second. Giving students an opportunity to say what they thought or felt about the reading, or to talk about issues that the story raised before digging into analysis valorizes their opinions. Although not untypical for some teachers, it's a pretty peculiar student whose first thought about a story is “I wonder what its theme was?” or “How did the characters develop through the story's events?”

A useful approach to opening discussion can be to use the grading of the quiz as a springboard for talking about the story. Since the questions are open-ended, students can argue for different interpretations of the piece. By the time students finish grading the quiz, they've covered 90% of the story.

Journal Prompts (some of these prompts could be turned into formal essays)

- Write an argument to convince the paperboy that he should escape Downey or argue for reasons for him to stay.
- The story can be read as a criticism of the “real” world. Using your knowledge of real world, what does the story say, specifically, are the problems that Downey avoids?

For a huge list of writing responses to stories, go to <https://www.centergrove.k12.in.us/page/115>

Literary Analysis Questions

- “Falling Out of Downey” requires a reader to understand hints and implications. What is it like to live in Downey? Address the nature of the citizens who live there, the unusual relationship the town seems to have with time, and the semi-permeable barrier that exists between Downey and the rest of the world.
- Stories address one or more of these three essential questions: Who are we? Where are we going? How should we behave? Which of these questions does “Falling Out of Downey” address most directly, and how does it answer it?