

Teaching “Orphaned”

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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 “Orphaned” 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:

- Voyages from Earth will undoubtedly involve long separations for the explorers. What parts of living on Earth do you think people in space ships will miss most? How do you think they will try to replace the missing experiences.
- Children see the world differently than adults do, but they experience many of the same emotions. Can you remember a time when you were brave as a child? Is it possible for a child to be heroic?
- What things scared you when you were young? How did you protect yourself or make yourself feel better when you were afraid?
- For some couples, the very worst that can happen to them is that they cannot have children. What do you think makes the desire to have children so strong (think both from a biological point of view and an emotional one).
- To “anthropomorphize” something is to give a non-human item human characteristics. Children will do this with toys, people will do it with pets, and some people will even do it to their car. Why do you think that people treat non-human things as if they had thoughts and feelings?

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 “proLong” 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:

- Methodic
- AI
- Misappropriation
- Incapacitated
- Telemetry
- Hydroponic
- Diagnostic
- Precipitously
- Pneumatic

“Orphaned” Quiz

Name _____

- 1) The main character, Ethan, chants a series of names at the beginning of the story (*Metis,Adrastea, Amalthea, Thebe*). What are those names and why is he saying them?
- 2) What does the readout, “0D, 2H, 12M, 8S,” mean, and why is it important in the story?
- 3) Dad says to Ethan at one point that he is a “misappropriation of resources.” At this point in the story it seems like an odd thing to say about his son, but he is being literal. In what way is Ethan a “misappropriation of resources”?
- 4) Why has Ethan’s parents told him never to talk to Relay Station?
- 5) The station has two mobile rovers. Why can’t Ethan easily use the second rover to rescue his parents?
- 6) Why is the station computer uncooperative with Ethan as he tries to get the second mobile rover ready?
- 7) Ethan would be much safer in the second mobile rover if he would wear a spacesuit. Why isn’t there a spacesuit that fits him?
- 8) The end of the story relies on a surprise. This surprise at the end is often called a plot twist. What is the plot twist that makes you rethink many of the events early in the story?

“Orphaned” Quiz Key

- 1) The main character, Ethan, chants a series of names at the beginning of the story (*Metis,Adrastea,Amalthea,Thebe*). What are those names and why is he saying them? *Students may have to look up the names to see that they are Saturn’s moons. Ethan chants them as a mantra to calm himself.*
- 2) What does the readout, “0D, 2H, 12M, 8S,” mean, and why is it important in the story? *Most students will realize within the context of the story that those numbers come from a time readout. Without the abbreviations, it says “One day, two hours, twelve minutes, and eight seconds. The time is counting down how much oxygen is left in the parents’ mobile rover. A more thoughtful student may point out that this has to be an approximation based on average breathing rates. Ethan’s parents would try to extend their breathable air, but the countdown would still be roughly accurate, and they would still need rescue.*
- 3) Dad says to Ethan at one point that he is a “misappropriation of resources.” At this point in the story it seems like an odd thing to say about his son, but he is being literal. In what way is Ethan a “misappropriation of resources”? *At the end of the story, the reader learns that Ethan isn’t actually their human child, but an android (a robot that they created so they could have a child). They don’t tell Earth about Ethan because they used valuable supplies to build him. They have misappropriated resources.*
- 4) Why has Ethan’s parents told him never to talk to Relay Station? *Since they were not supposed to create Ethan in the first place, they don’t want Earth to know he exists. A more perceptive student might point out that since their mission isn’t forever that Earth will find out when the parents’ mission is complete. Clearly the parents were thinking they would cross that bridge when they got to it. In the meantime, Ethan fills their very strong urge to be parents.*
- 5) The station has two mobile rovers. Why can’t Ethan easily use the second rover to rescue his parents? *The second rover has mechanical problems. The two most pressing ones are air leaks, and the missing artificial intelligence that controls many of its functions. At the end of the story, the reader can figure out that the missing AI is what Ethan’s parents’ used to give Ethan a brain.*
- 6) Why is the station computer uncooperative with Ethan as he tries to get the second mobile rover ready? *The station computer is emotionally attached to Ethan. It worries that he will hurt himself. This would be a good place to discuss if the computer’s emotion is “real,” or is it only programmed to behave as if it was emotional. Part of the answer to this question might come from looking at what point of view the story is told from, and whether the story implies that Ethan is “alive” or not.*
- 7) Ethan would be much safer in the second mobile rover if he would wear a spacesuit. Why isn’t there a spacesuit that fits him? *Ethan was not a part of the plan for the mission. There isn’t a spacesuit for him because Earth didn’t plan on him existing.*
- 8) The end of the story relies on a surprise. This surprise at the end is often called a plot twist. What is the plot twist that makes you rethink many of the events early in the story? *The plot twist is that Ethan is not a human child. He was built by his parents to give them a chance to be parents. Many of Ethan’s parents’ actions earlier in the story make more sense when the reader realizes that Ethan is not human, even though he thinks he is.*

“Orphaned”

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)

- Do you think it’s possible that technology will create androids that are indistinguishable from people? How might the world be different if there were robots who could perfectly mimic being human (Some students may be familiar with other science fictions that have explored this theme, such as *AI*, *Westworld*, *Bladerunner*, *Bladerunner 2049* and others).
- What do you think is the motivation to be courageous, especially if by being courageous a person risks their own life.
- Write a short narrative about when Ethan returns to Earth, and everyone knows he is not a person. Remember that he thinks and acts like a five-year old.
- It doesn’t look like Ethan will ever “grow” like a human (remember that he has a metal skeleton under his skin). Write a short narrative about Ethan forty years from when the events of “Orphaned” happened. He will still be “five,” but his parents will be elderly.

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

Literary Analysis Questions

- Ethan has a toy called “Alpha-man.” How does Alpha-man function in the story as a symbol? In what ways are Alpha-man and Ethan similar?
- Ethan has several conversations with the station’s computer. How are the characters of the two artificial intelligences different? Which one seems more mature?
- 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 “Orphaned” address most directly, and how does it answer it?