

Teaching “The Lies”

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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 “The Lies” 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:

- Are there circumstances where telling a lie is better than telling the truth?
- Some people who look toward the world’s future are worried that humanity is heading for a disaster. They worry about climate change, World War III, world-wide epidemics, or other unforeseen fates. Their futures are dystopic. Others believe that humanities advances in science and better cooperation will produce a future where many of the world’s problems are eliminated. Which future do you believe the world is headed for?
- What would you be willing to do to protect a family member or keep them happy?
- If you were given a chance to leave the Earth for a planet that sounds like a paradise, but you could never come back, would you go? Why or why not?
- Do you think it possible that in the future medical science will advance far enough to eliminate all disease?

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:

- Zeppelin
- Wainscoting
- Grandeur
- Carcinoma

“The Lies” Quiz

Name _____

- 1) What details does Bri include to convince her brother that the trip from Earth will be luxurious?
- 2) The brother describes the features of the hospital, Grace Taylor Hope. Why is he so excited about the hospital?
- 3) Although the story doesn't tell the reader directly, what appears to be wrong with Bri's health?
- 4) What are the conditions like where Bri is being kept during her illness?
- 5) The brother says that he has to go to “work.” What is his job?
- 6) What does the brother's job imply is happening to the world?
- 7) What lies do Bri and her brother tell each other?
- 8) The last thing the brother tells the readers in the story is “I have a ticket to the stars.” This sounds hopeful. How do you interpret the last line?

“The Lies” Quiz Key

- 1) What details does Bri include to convince her brother that the trip from Earth will be luxurious? *The description describes the stewards as being dressed like workers in a fancy hotel. The cabin is beautifully decorated. The passengers are given champagne in engraved glasses.*
- 2) The brother describes the features of the hospital, Grace Taylor Hope. Why is he so excited about the hospital? *He tells her that the doctors are amazingly skilled and can cure all diseases. He says the doctors are so good that even the healthy are cured. There is no grief in the hospital.*
- 3) Although the story doesn't tell the reader directly, what appears to be wrong with Bri's health? *She has difficulty breathing and speaking. She is too weak to stand, and she's lost her hair. She is frail. Some students will connect her disease to what is happening to the rest of the world. Whatever it is, so many people have it that they are being warehoused in a school's gymnasium. Many people are dying from it.*
- 4) What are the conditions like where Bri is being kept during her illness? *Terrible. Other patients are on cots. They are not being comforted or treated. Supplies that were scheduled for the ill have not arrived.*
- 5) The brother says that he has to go to “work.” What is his job? *He unloads the dead from trucks and puts them into giant pits for mass burial.*
- 6) What does the brother's job imply is happening to the world? *A world-wide epidemic.*
- 7) What lies do Bri and her brother tell each other? *It is possible that everything they tell each other about the rocket trip and the hospital are lies. Neither exist (the unrealistic details about how wonderful each is hints that they may be fanciful creations they have invented to make each of them feel better). Some students may argue that the rocket trip and the hospital are real, but it seems clear that neither one of them will be able to take advantage of them.*
- 8) The last thing the brother tells the readers in the story is “I have a ticket to the stars.” This sounds hopeful. How do you interpret the last line? *There are several ways to answer this question. More perceptive readers will recognize the irony of the line and argue that it is not hopeful. The brother does not have an actual ticket to the stars. It is a piece of paper that Bri may have torn out of a book. Also, it seems clear that Bri is dying and has no chance of recovery. Although a reader could argue that the brother is not giving into despair, and that he retains hope in the face of incredible hardship, it's hard to see that hope as anything other than self delusion.*

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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 defending the claim that the future is hopeful. Provide as many reasons as you can to support this optimistic vision.
- Write an argument defending the claim that the future is dire. Provide as many reasons as you can to support this pessimistic vision.
- The brother in the story describes the perfect hospital. Using his description as a model, describe the perfect school.
- Although the overall impact of “The Lies” is sad, there is an argument that the story truly is about love. How is this a story about love?

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

Literary Analysis Questions

- “The Lies” requires a reader to understand implications, which are facts that are not presented directly. Three areas that the story explores are what is actually going on in the world, what Bri's true medical condition is, and the brother's possible future. Choose one and using quotes from the story, state what the story implies and why you believe your interpretation to be the case.
- 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 “The Lies” address most directly, and how does it answer it?