

Teaching “We Have Always Lived in the Hamlet”

All materials by James Van Pelt © 2017.

Permission granted for teachers to copy for classroom use

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 “We Have Always Lived in the Hamlet” 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:

- Family connections are often the strongest ones a person can have. If you have brothers or sisters, how do you feel about them? If you do not, what do you think it would be like to have one? Why do you think family connections are so strong?
- The characters in the story will contrast their vision of heaven, which is different for each of them. For you, what would a perfect afterlife be like?
- In Greek mythology, the king, Odysseus, had to leave his family and go to war. For ten of the years he was gone, he struggled to return home. His son, Telemachus who was a baby when his father left, stayed home. Given a choice between a long, dangerous trip that also has adventures, and a long, comfortable life in the safety of your home, which would you choose and why?

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 “Three Paintings” 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:

- Meticulous
- Meditative
- Relativistic lag
- Utopia
- Sonnet
- Supernovae
- Wanderlust

“We Have Always Lived in the Hamlet” Quiz

Name _____

- 1) Tory and Janelle are sisters who look similar. They are very different kinds of people, though. What kind of person is Tory, and what kind of person is Janelle?
- 2) What does is the “Green Granddad” and what does Tory think about it?
- 3) Why does Janelle want to leave the Hamlet?
- 4) At first, after Janelle left, the two sisters communicated quite a bit, but “relativistic lag” made it harder and harder for them to talk. What is “relativistic lag”?
- 5) The world that Tory and Janelle lives in sounds like a utopia, which is the best of all possible worlds. What makes their world a utopia? How is the way people live in this story differ from how they live now?
- 6) Despite the advances in technology and solutions for many of society’s problems, the story says, “Not everything was perfect.” What problem has technology not solved?
- 7) How much time has passed for Tory since her sister went on her journey to the stars? How much time had passed for Janelle?
- 8) Janelle proposes that Tory travels to the stars and then return so the two of them will be nearly the same age. What does Tory propose instead? Why do you think she made that proposal?

“We Have Always Lived in the Hamlet” Quiz Key

- 1) Tory and Janelle are sisters who look similar. They are very different kinds of people, though. What kind of person is Tory, and what kind of person is Janelle? *Tory appears to be a logical, cautious person who loves her community and her sister. She likes to do quilting, and activity that requires patience, perseverance and accuracy. Janelle appears to be more adventurous. Even though she seems to care for her sister, she does not have the patience as Tory does, and she longs to explore the universe.*
- 2) What does is the “Green Granddad” and what does Tory think about it? *The Green Granddad is a huge, thousand-year old Yew tree. Clearly Tory likes the setting the tree creates.*
- 3) Why does Janelle want to leave the Hamlet? *Janelle says that leaving with be an “adventure.” Later in the story, the two compare their vision of heaven. Janelle says, “My heaven is a long series of hills with something wonderful behind each one. No matter how many I climb, there’s another one afterwards. It’s a place where I can build things like houses or cities or empires, and then abandon them to climb the next hill.”*
- 4) At first, after Janelle left, the two sisters communicated quite a bit, but “relativistic lag” made it harder and harder for them to talk. What is “relativistic lag”? *As Janelle’s spaceship travels at increasingly faster speeds, the signal is not only delayed getting to Earth because of the distance between them, the message also stretches out, taking longer and longer to complete itself from Tory’s point of view. Eventually, communication becomes impractical.*
- 5) The world that Tory and Janelle lives in sounds like a utopia, which is the best of all possible worlds. What makes their world a utopia? How is the way people live in this story differ from how they live now? *The story says that technology has eliminated the need for people to work. “Working forty, fifty, sixty hours a week for wages with the hope of a brief rest at the end belonged to an era that passed.” People could pursue their interests. Today, of course, most people have to have jobs to earn the money to pay for food, housing, travel, etc.*
- 6) Despite the advances in technology and solutions for many of society’s problems, the story says, “Not everything was perfect.” What problem has technology not solved? *Although medicine has advanced, it has not been able to eliminate aging. Tory is incredibly old by our standards, but she is not immortal.*
- 7) How much time has passed for Tory since her sister went on her journey to the stars? How much time had passed for Janelle? *From Tory’s point of view, her sister has been gone for two-hundred years. From Janelle’s point of view, she has been traveling for twenty years.*
- 8) Janelle proposes that Tory travels to the stars and then return so the two of them will be nearly the same age. What does Tory propose instead? Why do you think she made that proposal? *Tory proposes that they travel together. Even though they are no longer close in age, Tory appears to want to have time with her sister. She wants what she has lost for the last two-hundred years.*

“We Have Always Lived in the Hamlet”

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)

- The story suggests that utopia would be a world where no one had to have a job. Some people argue that work and useful labor is what gives life purpose. Most people know someone who has retired and doesn't need to have a job who still works. Write an argument that argues for your definition of utopia.
- The author imagines some of the wonders that Janelle might have seen on her journey. She says, “I've done a thousand deeds, Tory. I climbed a volcano's throat. I sailed a silk-sheeted sloop on an ammonia sea. I raced from a supernovae, convinced for every second that we'd started away too late.” Write your own version of what a traveler to space might see that would fill them with what science fiction calls “a sense of wonder.”
- Instead of the ending the story suggests, which has the two sisters traveling together, write your version of what either sister's next ten years would be like if Janelle stayed in the Hamlet and Tory traveled without her. Write from either sister's point of view.

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

Literary Analysis Questions

- The story frequently returns to the quilting that Tory enjoys and Janelle does poorly. How does quilting function symbolically in the story?
- Compare and contrast the character of Tory and Janelle. Use direct evidence from the story to support your description of each.
- One way to look at Tory and Janelle is that they both like exploration and adventure. Janelle's quest for the novel and new are a more traditional way to show a desire to explore. How can Tory's character also be seen as one that seeks newness and challenges?
- The story opens with a conversation between the two sisters and it ends with the women together again. How have the events in the middle of the story changed them? In what way are the conversations similar and how are they different?