

Teaching “proLong”

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Before Reading: **For more mature audiences. The story includes a suggestive sex scene.**

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 “proLong” 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:

- The pursuit of the fountain of youth appears frequently in literature. What do you think about how you will feel when you are 60 or 80 or 100?
- What do you think of the concept of growing old? What age do you consider to be “old”? Has that age changed as you have grown older yourself?
- There is a story about a man who the king condemned to be beheaded. The man said to the king, “It would be a terrible loss for you to behead me because I can teach your favorite horse to talk.” The king loved his favorite horse, and the idea that he could talk to it appealed to him, so he gave the condemned man a year to teach the horse. If at the end of the year the horse couldn’t talk, the man would be beheaded. As the jailer was taking the man to the stables for the first day of lessons, the jailer said, “Why would you make such a bargain? It’s foolish.” The condemned man said, “A lot can happen in a year. I could die; the king could die, or maybe the horse will talk.” Discuss what you believe is the point of that story.

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:

- Efficacy
- Cholesterol
- Immunoglobulins
- Mortality
- Geriatric
- Pharmaceuticals
- Windfall
- Cannon fodder
- Deductibles
- Dementia

“proLong” Quiz

Name _____

- 1) The story opens with the main character, Remy, meeting a young man in a bar. What does Remy want from the man?
- 2) How does Remy discover that the young man in the bar is trying to rip him off and isn't who he says he is?
- 3) The story is set not too far into the future. One of the improvements is how much information a person can find out about their health. What piece of technology does Remy use to track several markers of his health and what can he learn?
- 4) At the end of the scene with Tina, Remy pretends to be asleep. Why does he do that and what does it tell you about his character?
- 5) Remy meets Mark in *The Turning Tide*, a “grey bar.” Remy suspects that Mark has found the drug that Remy has been looking for. What clues tips him off?
- 6) Remy says that Harold is a “conspiracists.” What conspiracy does Harold believe in?
- 7) How much does Remy have to pay to buy a single dose of proLong?
- 8) At the end of the story, Remy learns that he has only bought a single extra year of youth, but the tone at the end is happy. Why is Remy a happy customer at the end, even though he appears to be facing old age and death in only twelve months?

“proLong” Quiz Key

- 1) The story opens with the main character, Remy, meeting a young man in a bar. What does Remy want from the man? *Remy is hoping to buy a drug with the street name of “Lady Kisses” or “Ruby Slippers.” It is also called proLong. The drug reverses aging.*
- 2) How does Remy discover that the young man in the bar is trying to rip him off and isn’t who he says he is? *Remy tells Tina later that the young man’s ID was obviously faked.*
- 3) The story is set not too far into the future. One of the improvements is how much information a person can find out about their health. What piece of technology does Remy use to track several markers of his health and what can he learn? *Remy’s watch tells him “blood pressure, heart rate, O2 intake, white blood cell count, cholesterol, electrolytes, and thirty other metrics.” The information is streamed to an “autodoc” that helps him keep track of how well he is doing. It is easy to point out to students that we have technology now that already does part of this work, like a Fitbit or Apple Watch.*
- 4) At the end of the scene with Tina, Remy pretends to be asleep. Why does he do that and what does it tell you about his character? *Remy knows that Tina’s child is sick, and that she would rather be home. Even though he has paid her to stay all night, he pretends to be sleeping so she can leave to go home with her child. His action reveals that he has empathy and is a nice guy.*
- 5) Remy meets Mark in *The Turning Tide*, a “grey bar.” Remy suspects that Mark has found the drug that Remy has been looking for. What clues tips him off? *Mark has a spring in his step. His hands don’t tremble. His memory and ability to do math seem very sharp. He’s flirty with the waitress.*
- 6) Remy says that Harold is a “conspiracists.” What conspiracy does Harold believe in? *Harold believes that the medical and insurance companies conspire together to make as much profit as possible. He believes they do not exist to save lives or to keep people healthy unless they are also making as much money as possible from human sickness and suffering.*
- 7) How much does Remy have to pay to buy a single dose of proLong? *All the money he has. In his case, that is the totality of his retirement account. Young students may need a reminder to think both of how much money that might be and how many decades of work someone like Remy would have invested to build up this account.*
- 8) At the end of the story, Remy learns that he has only bought a single extra year of youth, but the tone at the end is happy. Why is Remy a happy customer at the end, even though he appears to be facing old age and death in only twelve months? *The story says, “He hadn’t popped the pill yet, he already felt immortal. A wise part of him said, “It’s the overconfidence of youth,” but the rest of him trusted, really trusted, that in a year he could do it. Nothing stops you when you’re young. No mountain can’t be climbed. No ocean can’t be swum. Remy felt the power aching to get out. He was young, or would be soon, and possibility is never ending.”*

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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)

- The story is told from the point of view of someone who is sixty-six and feeling the impact of aging. Interview the oldest person you know and ask them to share what they see are the physical and emotional differences between when they were your age and their age now. There's a cliché that older people sometimes use, which is “If I only knew then what I know now.” Tell them that you are at their “then.” Ask them what they know now.
- The writer George Bernard Shaw famously remarked that youth is wasted upon the young. What do you think he meant?
- If you could choose an age to be, what age would you choose and why?

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

Literary Analysis Questions

- Remy is developed as a character throughout the story. Considering Remy's speeches and actions in the story, how would you characterize him?
- One way to look at stories is to exam how they answer one or more of these three, fundamental questions: Who are we? Where are we going? and How should we behave? Which question do you think “proLong” addresses most strongly, and how does it answer it?
- The story seems to offer a definition of what it means to be young. How does the story define youth. Use quotes from the story to support your answer.