

Teaching “The Lawn Fairy War”

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 “The Lawn Fairy War” is a science fiction or fantasy.

Discussing themes: Another 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:

- Do you have a hobby? What do you enjoy about it? Why do people have hobbies?
- What imaginary creatures do you wish were real? What do you like about them?
- How do you handle conflicts with other people?
- What is the difference between annoyance and tolerance?
- Stories with classical fantasy elements in them often have a distinct difference between the good and bad (fairies are good while trolls are bad). Do you think some people like fantasy because good and bad seem so clearly different? How do fantasies with clear good and bad differ from the real world?

Background: Sharing with the students the story of the Cottingley Fairies and the obsession with them can give the students an interesting context for “The Lawn Fairy War.”

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 “In Memoriam” 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:

- Gargoyle
- Daguerreotype
- Figurine
- Jamboree
- Henna
- Covenants
- Idolatrous
- Acrimonious
- Sanctimonious
- Bungalow
- Namaste

“The Lawn Fairy War” Quiz

Name _____

- 1) At the beginning of the story, what does Grace Lily White like and why does Ashley Tombley irritate her?

- 2) What do the neighbors think of Grace Lily White and her yard?

- 3) What do Grace’s choice in lawn ornaments reveal about her personality and how does this contrast with Ashley Tombley’s personality as revealed by her lawn decorations?

- 4) How are Grace and Ashley similar?

- 5) Grace tries three strategies to get rid of Ashley’s lawn ornaments before the last scene of the story. What were her strategies?

- 6) Why does Grace believe that Selma, her high school enemy, a woman who also tried to get rid of Grace’s lawn ornaments, will help her in her battle with Ashley?

- 7) Although the story doesn’t specifically tell you, what appears to have happened the night of the storm?

- 8) Does the story set up a conflict between a “good” character and a “bad” one? If so, which is which and how did you make your choice? If not, how are the two characters equally “good” and/or “bad?”

“The Lawn Fairy War” Quiz

Name _____

- 1) At the beginning of the story, what does Grace Lily White like and why does Ashley Tombley irritate her? *Grace Lily White likes her fairyland yard and she dislikes Ashley's much darker decorating choices. Some students may suggest that Grace favors the good, fun or nicer fantasy characters while Ashley likes the darker characters. Students who have attended comic conventions might share that attendees who enjoy cosplay (dressing like their favorite characters) often make the same sort of choices that Grace and Ashley make, dressing either like heroes or villains.*
- 2) What do the neighbors think of Grace Lily White and her yard? *The story says that the neighbors thought she was “a little batty” but they seemed to tolerate her.*
- 3) What do Grace's choice in lawn ornaments reveal about her personality and how does this contrast with Ashley Tombley's personality as revealed by her lawn decorations? *Grace appears to be optimistic and see the world through rose-colored glasses. Ashley appears more cynical and dark. There are other interpretations. The key to grading this question is in the logic of the student's support. What in the text supports their answer?*
- 4) How are Grace and Ashley similar? *Although the two women have made completely different choices in how to decorate their yard, they both are interested in mythic or imaginary creatures, so much so that they display their hobbies for the rest of the neighborhood to see. The neighbors probably consider the two to be equally “batty.”*
- 5) Grace tries three strategies to get rid of Ashley's lawn ornaments before the last scene of the story. What were her strategies? *First she talks to Ashley directly. Then she talks to the city planner. Finally she visits Selma, hoping that the woman's confrontational Christianity will go to war with Ashley's dark tastes. Grace's last strategy is to buy the ceramic dragons.*
- 6) Why does Grace believe that Selma, her high school enemy, a woman who also tried to get rid of Grace's lawn ornaments, will help her in her battle with Ashley? *Grace's last encounter with Selma was fueled by Selma's firm belief that everything that was supernatural was demonic and flew in the face of her Christian beliefs. Grace hoped that Selma would be more offended by the gargoyles, wolves and tombstones that she was by fairies.*
- 7) Although the story doesn't specifically tell you, what appears to have happened the night of the storm? *The story implies that the storm somehow woke up and animated the ceramic creatures. At least one of Ashley's creatures crossed into Grace's yard and began killing the fairies and destroying the decorations. The surviving fairies exhibited their own strength and were able to defend Grace long enough that she was able to get into the house. She discovers that her jacket and blouse were cut. Evidently she narrowly avoided being hurt. One of the gargoyles smashed against the side of Grace's house and shattered.*
- 8) Does the story set up a conflict between a “good” character and a “bad” one? If so, which is which and how did you make your choice? If not, how are the two characters equally “good” and/or “bad?” *This is an interpretive question with no single correct answer. A good answer will provide support from the text. The author tried to make the two characters equal, but readers can go either way.*

“The Lawn Fairy War” 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)

- Some people argue that “reality” is objective. In other words, everyone should perceive the world in the same way. Others argue that reality is subjective. In other words, what a person believes shapes their reality. Which do you believe and why?
- If you could choose one mythical creature to become real, what would you choose and why? (This prompt might work better if students brainstormed a list of mythical creatures before hand)
- Many societies believe in freedom of expression. How might this freedom cause conflicts? How does a society handle a conflict when one person’s freedom of expression is annoying or even repulsive to someone else?
- Rewrite the ending of the story so that it is not a fantasy story at all. If neither character moved away, how might their conflict be resolved, or if it isn’t resolved, how might it escalate?
- How is “The Lawn Fairy War” similar to the movie, *Toy Story*? Why is *Toy Story* so popular?
- Choose your favorite scene or image from the story and illustrate it (This could be a popular option for students who particularly enjoy fantasy imager).
- Rewrite the story as a poem.
-

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

Literary Analysis Questions

- How does the title relate to the events and meaning of the story?
- How do the names of the two main characters seem appropriate in the story?
- What kind of person is Grace or Ashley? How does the author reveal either character? Use quotes to support your answer.
- The story is narrated in third person, attached. In other words, everything you learn in the story comes from what Grace knows, experiences or thinks. The readers never see the story from Ashley’s point of view. How would the story change if it came from Ashley’s point of view?
- The story has a distinct structure that some writers call a try/fail pattern. Describe the story’s structure, organizing your answer around each of Grace’s “try” attempts.
- What objects in the story seem symbolic? What do you think they symbolize, and why did they strike you as being more than just literal?
- Although “The Lawn Fairy War” is a fantasy, what realities about how people behave and the human condition does the story reveal?