

# Teaching “Three Paintings”

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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 “Three Paintings” 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:

- Painters, poets, song writers and creative people of all sorts are often asked where their ideas come from. Most say that they’re not sure. The Greeks believed ideas came from the Muses, nine goddesses who provided inspiration. The source of creativity is a mystery to most. Discuss where you get ideas from. Is there any way you can improve your ability to get ideas? When you have a creative project to do, how do you get started?
- How would you behave if you knew that you were like a character in a video game who could always “save” his position before making a move?
- Numerous novels are published each year. Only a few become best sellers. Thousands of paintings are completed each year. Only a few are sold for thousands of dollars. What do you think makes a work of art famous?

**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:

- Contemporary
- Barista
- Buoyant
- Contemplation
- Counterpoint
- “Golden mean”
- Relevancy
- Invalidate
- Zen
- Seething

# “Three Paintings” Quiz

Name \_\_\_\_\_

- 1) The story begins with a technician saying, “They’re you go, Vincent. You’re backed up.” It’s unlikely readers would know what that meant when they started the story. Based on your reading deeper into the story, what does it mean to be “backed up”?
  
- 2) What is Brian’s relationship to Vincent?
  
- 3) At the beginning of the story, Brian is annoyed that Vincent wants to stop to get breakfast before going to the studio. Later in the story, Brian is much more insistent that they don’t stop at the bagel shop. Why is Brian more worried about these breakfast stops later in the story than he is the first time they visit the shop?
  
- 4) “Synesthesia” is a phenomena where the body is stimulated through one sense but experiences it through another, like someone who hears a sound that makes them smell something, or sees a color that they experience as a touch on the skin. “Three Paintings” uses synesthesia for some of its descriptions. Quote one of them.
  
- 5) After Vincent kills himself the first time, the story has five short sections that are separated from each other. What is the author showing through those five sections?
  
- 6) Brian gives the bagel clerk a twenty-dollar bill to pay for an eight-dollar meal, leaving the rest for a tip. Why such a large tip?
  
- 7) Why did Vincent begin the experiment that involved killing himself at the end each time?
  
- 8) Does the ending imply that Vincent is discouraged by what has happened to him or inspired to paint more?

## “Three Paintings” Quiz Key

- 1) The story begins with a technician saying, “They’re you go, Vincent. You’re backed up.” It’s unlikely readers would know what that meant when they started the story. Based on your reading deeper into the story, what does it mean to be “backed up”? *This is a technique in the future where a person’s complete personality, along with all of their memories, can be saved, just like saving a file on a computer. The copy can then be imprinted into a blank brain, effectively bringing the person who was backed up to life in another body.*
- 2) What is Brian’s relationship to Vincent? *Brian is Vincent’s business manager. Vincent creates valuable art. Brian is in charge of marketing, which makes both men wealthy. During the story, Brian also makes sure Vincent is supported in his isolated effort to make new art.*
- 3) At the beginning of the story, Brian is annoyed that Vincent wants to stop to get breakfast before going to the studio. Later in the story, Brian is much more insistent that they don’t stop at the bagel shop. Why is Brian more worried about these breakfast stops later in the story than he is the first time they visit the shop? *At the beginning, Brian probably is just impatient for the experiment to begin. A more perceptive student might suggest that Brian knows whatever encounter Vincent has in the bagel shop won’t be duplicated the next time they go in, which means that the effort to make each painting session the same will fail. A student might suggest that the nervousness from Brian later comes from the same reasons. A more perceptive student might point out that Brian is afraid Vincent will hear something that will tell him that Brian has brought him to the shop way more than the three times the original plan called for.*
- 4) “Synesthesia” is a phenomena where the body is stimulated through one sense but experiences it through another, like someone who hears a sound that makes them smell something, or sees a color that they experience as a touch on the skin. “Three Paintings” uses synesthesia for some of its descriptions. Quote one of them. *There are several examples of synesthesia in the story, starting with the line, “Color, tone, shape, gesture, texture, all tumbled in his head.”*
- 5) After Vincent kills himself the first time, the story has five short sections that are separated from each other. What is the author showing through those five sections? *Each section represents an experience from one of the many times Vincent was in the room. Most readers will recognize that on a second read through the story.*
- 6) Brian gives the bagel clerk a twenty-dollar bill to pay for an eight-dollar meal, leaving the rest for a tip. Why such a large tip? *Some students may say that Brian was stung by the charge that he was cheap. Others could say that Brian was worried the clerk would say something that would clue Vincent into how many times he’d been in the shop. The large tip was an easy way to get out of the store in a hurry.*
- 7) Why did Vincent begin the experiment that involved killing himself at the end each time? *He was worried that his art was no longer cutting-edge. He also wanted to explore the source of inspiration. Some readers might point out that it was a way to make a lot of money, although that seems more like Brian’s motivation.*
- 8) Does the ending imply that Vincent is discouraged by what has happened to him or inspired to paint more? *Although Vincent finds out that he has died way more times in the story than he planned (many of the deaths were murders by Brian’s hand), and that his business partner seems to have no trouble killing him, Vincent ends the story excited about his next painting. The woman he sees on the street looks like a possible subject of his next work.*

# **“Three Paintings”**

## **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)**

- Find a painting that you think particularly interesting. What do you think the artist was thinking as she/he painted it? What mood do you think the artist was in? What do you see in the painting that suggests what the artist had in mind?
- A researcher who became interested in goal setting and sacrifice asked numerous elite athletes if they were given a choice of winning an Olympic gold medal or living an extra ten years, what would they choose. A majority of them chose the gold medal. Describe a goal that you have that you would be willing to achieve, even at great sacrifice.
- Imagine that the police have arrested Brian at Vincent's studio right after Brian shot him. Knowing that Vincent is “backed up,” is Brian guilty of murder? If you were one of the lawyers at the trial, would you rather be the prosecutor or the defense? What arguments would you make to win your case?

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

### **Literary Analysis Questions**

- What does the story say about the importance of art in the human experience?
- A couple of Vincent's paintings are described in the story. How do the painting reflect thematically on the story overall?
- How does the story use foreshadowing to show that Brian cannot be trusted?
- Minor characters often serve as a foil to the main character to highlight the main character's personality. How do the encounters with the bagel clerk show different facets of Vincent's personality?