

“Gulliver The Story of a Tall Man” Lesson Plan

Overview

This lesson plan will provide teachers with extra information about Thomas Wolfe, some analysis of his short story “Gulliver: The Story of a Tall Man,” and an overview of Gulliver’s Travels by Jonathan Swift. The information here will provide material for discussion about these stories in class as a companion to the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Student Writing Competition’s Ideas for Student Consideration.

Objectives:

1. Students will create a work of fiction based on their own personal experiences or the experiences of someone they know.
2. Students will be able to explain how Thomas Wolfe's writing was autobiographical.
3. Students will be able to summarize Gulliver's adventure in Lilliput and make connections between this story and “Gulliver: The Story of a Tall Man.”

Suitable for classes in grades 4-12.

North Carolina Standard Course of Study, English Language Arts

RL.4-12.2 - Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.

RL.4-12.3 - Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text.

RL.4-12.4 - Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including words that affect meaning and tone.

RL.4-12.6 - Compare and contrast the point of view from which different stories are narrated, including the difference between first- and third-person narrations.

W.4-12.3 - Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

Procedures

Procedures may be adapted for the needs of the class.

Total time: 1-1.5 hours

Preparation:

- Download or print image files from website to supplement lesson. They can be passed around class if no computer projector is available.
- Download and printout:
 - Wolfe’s short story
 - Vocab list for the short story

- Chapter one of Gulliver’s Travels
- The Writing Competition Introduction, Guidelines & Instructions and Ideas for Student Consideration.
- Use dry-erase board or pull up a word document to write out connections between Wolfe’s short story and chapter one of Gulliver’s Travels.
- Find one or two fashion magazines to discuss or print images from them to pass around class.

Step 1: Discuss Thomas Wolfe and his work.

Thomas Clayton Wolfe was born on October 3, 1900 in Asheville, North Carolina. He was the last of eight children born to William Oliver (1851-1922) and Julia Elizabeth Wolfe (1860-1945). In 1906, just before his sixth birthday, his mother became the owner and operator of the Old Kentucky Home boardinghouse. Soon after, she moved herself and a young Thomas into the house. He later described the experience as being uprooted and separated from “the tumultuous, unhappy, warm centre of his home,” Wolfe quickly felt cheated out of a normal childhood due to the lack of privacy that came with sharing his living space with strangers from all over the country. Wolfe later used his childhood experiences to create much of his writing material. His first book, *Look Homeward, Angel*, published in October 1929 earned him a reputation as an autobiographical writer. The novel followed the life of young Eugene Gant, whose background and family closely resembled Wolfe’s own. While *Look Homeward, Angel* was well-received in much of the United States and around the world, it was not appreciated by some individuals in his hometown. Asheville residents, including his own family and friends, easily recognized themselves and people they knew as characters in the work. As a result, Wolfe received angry letters from people displeased with the book. He would not dare return home to Asheville until 1937, over seven years later. Along with his larger novels, Wolfe wrote many short stories which were often published in magazines and periodicals of the day. Because he did not manage his money wisely, the publication of short stories gave Wolfe a more consistent paycheck between the release of his books, and he often used this money to support his many travels around the U.S. and to Europe. One such story was “Gulliver: The Story of a Tall Man” which was published by Scribner’s Magazine in June 1935. The story would also become a part of his first book of short stories *From Death to Morning* (1935).

Step 2: Pass around copies of “Gulliver: The Story of a Tall Man” and the Vocabulary Sheet (can have students’ reference on their own). Give students about 10 minutes to begin to read through Wolfe’s story. Ask students to explain what they read. Does the story have an overall theme? If so, what is it?

- Wolfe’s story describes “the strangest and most lonely world there is,” that of a very tall person. He goes into some detail on the challenges that are brought by his size, living in a world built too small for him in every way: ranging from clothing, to transportation, to average appetite.
- Wolfe illustrates his place in life by referencing several mythological stories of famous giants: namely Gulliver’s adventures on Lilliput.

- Despite his proportion to everything around him, Wolfe generally does not think of himself as being particularly tall at all. It is only when making his way through “those streets that swarm forever with their tidal floods of five feet eight,” that he is reminded of his immense size when others feel the need to comment on it.
- He ruefully accepts the fact that he must deal with people’s constant joking and questioning about his height. However, he remains generally hopeful towards humanity and its attitude towards him. Conversations he has with men at a bar, and their subsequent understanding of his situation when he describes the challenges of his size to them, give him hope for “man’s fundamental goodness, kindness, and humanity...”

Inform the class of the average man’s height during Wolfe’s lifetime (5’ 9”) compared to his own (6’6 ½”). Pass around and/or display images of Tom that demonstrate his height. Discuss things that would be difficult for a person of Wolfe’s size (beds, clothing, transportation, etc.).

Information on Photographs:

- Thomas Wolfe and E. A. Griffin at the Pi Kappa Pi House in Chapel Hill, 1918.
- Photographer Robert Disraeli took this candid photograph in Wolfe’s New York City apartment in 1935.
 - Wolfe told Disraeli he was suspicious of him, as so many photographers liked to take pictures of him effortlessly reaching up to change a lightbulb to show how tall he was.
 - As Wolfe talked, he demonstrated how people would pose him to exaggerate his height, and Disraeli spontaneously took the photograph.

Adaptation/Extension: Go over vocabulary words on worksheet given to students.

Step 3: Go over chapter one of Gulliver’s Travels. Discuss the story’s beginnings as a satire of similar stories written by explorers telling fantastic (and wildly embellished) stories of their experiences in far-away lands.

Commonly known as Gulliver’s Travels, Jonathan Swift’s 1726 book was originally titled “Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World. In Four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of Several Ships. It has never been out of print. Despite the depth of the book, it is often classified as a children’s story because of the popularity of part one, the Lilliput section. One can still buy books entitled Gulliver’s Travels which contain only parts of the Lilliput voyage. The original work contained four parts. The major themes of the book included:

- A satirical view of the state of European government, and of petty differences between religions.
- An inquiry into whether men are inherently corrupt or whether they become corrupted.
- A restatement of the older "ancients versus moderns" controversy previously addressed by Swift in his writings.

Gulliver embarks on four distinct journeys, each of which begins with a shipwreck and ends with either a daring escape or a congenial decision that it is time for Gulliver to leave. The societies Gulliver meets helping him, and the reader, to examine his own culture more closely. Gulliver is presented as a commonplace "everyman", lacking higher education, he possesses a remarkable natural gift for language. He quickly becomes fluent in the native tongue of any strange land in which he finds himself. Gulliver is presented as being gullible; he believes what he is told, never perceives deeper meanings, is an honest man, and expects others to be honest. This makes for fun and irony in the story. Each part of the book is the reverse of the preceding part, for example, Gulliver is big then small, wise then ignorant. The countries he describes are each different, simple verses scientific, and the forms of government are either worse or better than England's.

Note that during his adventure in Lilliput, Gulliver's height becomes a national asset as he is used as a source of amusement by the Lilliputian royal court and defense by the country. He, like Wolfe, must also endure a world in which everything is too small for him (though on a much grander scale).

Adaptation/Extension: Briefly go over chapters 2-4 of Gulliver's Travels to learn more of how Gulliver's experiences were defined by his size.

Step 5: Compare the two stories. As a class, make connections between Wolfe and Gulliver's Travels (listed below), and write students' answers on a dry-erase board or typing them up on a word document. Note how Wolfe's writings are based more closely on personal experience (though he is often known to add elements of fantasy) and uses Gulliver to help illustrate his story. Using the answers on the board, reiterate Wolfe's love of using mythology to help illustrate his stories.

- Both figures are giants in a world of smaller "normal" people.
- Both are the subject of amusement for others.
 - Wolfe starts with passersby on the street. He is the subject of many jokes (which are always the same) at the hands of strangers in bars or other public places.
 - Gulliver is viewed with wonder and amusement by the townsfolk on the island of Lilliput and made to pose and perform for the royal court.
- Both must endure worlds in which everything is built/made too small for them. Food, clothing, furniture, etc. must be special made.
- The height of both figures is seen as an asset rather than a bother.

Step 6: Ask class what they think of as a "normal" or "typical" person. On a projector screen, pull up images that demonstrate standards of what the ideal of "normal" is by today's standards.

Alternate Step: Pass around fashion magazines or print out images from them to pass around the class.

Step 7: Ask class what it means for a person to be "different." Have students name the title of a classic story or classic character with a "different" or unique trait (good or bad) on a dry erase board. Ex: The Ugly Duckling, Zootopia, Shrek, The Hunchback of Notre Dame, Fantastic Mr.

Fox, the Iron Giant, Wonder, Forest Gump, various superheroes, ancient myths, etc. Discuss how the lives of the characters in these stories are defined by their unique trait.

Alternate Step: Instead of writing down the name of a story or character, ask class to draw pictures.

Step 8: Pass out the writing contest “Guidelines and Instructions” and “Prompts” sheets to class. Reiterate/discuss further how Wolfe took from his own life when writing short stories and novels. Have the class think of things that make them or someone they know "different" or unique, and create a character based on these differences and write a short description of this character/their differences. Go over writing assignments before wrapping up lesson.

- *Optional Step:* Have students draw a picture of the “different” character they may want to include in their story.
- *Extension:* Have students visit the Thomas Wolfe Memorial to learn more about the man and his writings. (To schedule a tour contact **Bonnie Showfety** to see what is available.)

Writing Assignment: Have students write short story based on criteria outlined on “Guidelines and Instructions” and “Prompts” sheets.

Submission of stories to writing contest is optional.

ALL SUBMISSIONS ARE DUE BY 5:00PM on Friday, September 25th

Submit via Google Form: <https://forms.gle/URjzYmgpF2HEehys7>

If the class or at least one student decides to submit their work, follow the instructions on the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Website under the Student Writing Competition Tab.

<https://wolfememorial.com/student-writing-competition/>

If you have any questions, please reach out to Bonnie Showfety

Bonnie.showfety@dncr.nc.gov or 828-253-8304

“Gulliver: The Story of a Tall Man” by Thomas Wolfe Scribner’s Magazine (June 1935).

<http://www.unz.org/Pub/Scribners-1935jun-00328?View=PDF>

Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift (1726).

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/829/829-h/829-h.htm>

Audio versions of Gulliver’s Travels:

https://librivox.org/search?title=Gulliver's+Travels&author=Swift&reader=&keywords=&genre_id=0&status=all&project_type=either&recorded_language=&sort_order=catalog_date&search_page=1&search_form=advanced

Additional Resources:

<https://wolfememorial.com/history/toms-life/>

<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/gulliver>