



Seuss for Seventh Graders: Identifying Explicit and Implicit Themes within the Works of Dr. Seuss

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Rationale

The majority of my students are reading below grade level; that is MY reality in the classroom. The good news is that they are capable of critical thinking! I am often amazed at the higher level thinking my students display during class discussions *when I read to them* . Even my severely struggling readers are eager to join in conversations about various literary works.... *as long as they don't have to read these selections themselves.*

I find that my CMT-based language arts curriculum prescribes skills and strategies that are necessary for my students to learn; however, the recommended selections found in our textbook create a barrier for student learning. My level one readers are capable of learning to distinguish between implicit and explicit themes, but when they are required to comprehend Greek myths in order to grasp that specific skill, they falter. The mountain of READING looms too great and so the critical thinking falls by the wayside.

My hope is that with this unit, I can create a way for struggling seventh grade readers to “conquer” a piece of literature and then feel confident to explore and critique that work. I have chosen to focus on the works of Dr. Seuss because 1) they are at an elementary reading level that all of my students can read and comprehend, 2) they are thematically written with both explicit and implicit themes that will invite discussion, and 3) Dr. Seuss is a well-known author to my students, but many of his works (especially the ones we will read) are much less well-known to them. Therefore, the students will begin the unit feeling confident with the author and his style, but will soon encounter new stories, new questions, and new ways of looking at his works.

The strategies and activities forming the basis of the unit will take place over a three-week period. After discussing the literary concept of theme (implicit vs. explicit), I will introduce the books of Dr. Seuss by challenging my students to “look beyond the simplicity.” Of course this challenge will initially be met with eye-rolling and audible sighs. It is here that I think I will need to give my students a kinesthetic way to become literary critics, a way to initially transcend the excuse of “been there... done that... read that before...” while at the same time make use of these literary prejudices as a jumping off point for later discussions.

My idea is to simply change the seating in my classroom. I have a feeling that if (for the three weeks of our unit) we push the “student” desks against the wall and bring in “adult” folding chairs, we will create an

environment where the students can break out of the student mold and form a new literary identity. Instead of having the familiar elementary classroom where the teacher is sitting at a higher level reading to children in desks, we will have a true literary circle where both students and teachers are sitting at the same level in a circular arrangement conducive to sharing, evaluating and discussing literature -- not "learning Dr. Seuss."

Once we have overcome this first challenge, 7th grade condescension, we will begin by looking at the man behind the books. The students will need a framework for distinguishing the various themes prevalent in each book. By focusing on the literary concept of *conflict*, students will be able to read the biographical sketch of Theodor Seuss Geisel and pick out the conflicts that shaped his own personality and sense of morality. This exercise will hopefully expand their knowledge base allowing them to find historical and personal connections within many universal themes. This particular critical thinking activity corresponds directly to the strategy of connecting put forth by the Connecticut Writing Project. The CWP encourages students to connect to literature in three ways: text to self (How does it relate to me?), text to text (How does this relate to other things I've read?), and text to world (How does this relate to historical or world events?)

One of the over-arching goals for this unit will be to instill the value of interpretation into my students by giving them the tools and the opportunities to practice within a literary environment. Because we will be focusing on "children's books", I believe the students will confidently point out the obvious theme within the basic plot, but it is also my belief that they will just as easily see a second or third theme come through within the initial readings of the stories. By developing another interpretation so quickly and finding that others in their group have done the same, the students will learn that multiple interpretations of the same book are possible. Then, of course, the question will arise as to how each person developed his or her own interpretation if each person heard the same story -- same words, same plot, same characters. Hopefully, the realization will hit (or come in the form a teacher hint) that it must come from each individual's background knowledge and experience. Interpretation relies on the merging of one's own individual experience with the experiences of others: the author, characters, historical figures, etc. Because interpretations start within each individual, each individual has a voice and an interpretation to share! This break-through in thinking will not only set the stage for quality discussions and active participation throughout the unit, but it will also validate the experiences of every student. Every problem, trial, tribulation, and success that they have experienced allows them a unique way of looking at things. Each and every student should emerge from this literary experience saying, "If my own experiences helped me uncover a new layer within a simple Dr. Seuss book, I can find new ways of looking at everything: literature, history, science, art..." The interpretive opportunities are endless.

This pedagogical belief was corroborated by former teacher Rita Roth in a 1989 article titled, *On Beyond Zebra with Dr. Seuss*. Roth states:

Because of its potential, children's literature can be a strong vehicle in the effort to stretch our students, to move them toward critical literacy -- a literacy that goes beyond decoding and comprehending, what the author says. Critical literacy entails reflection -- connecting the printed text to our personal experience and prior knowledge. It entails relating the meanings evoked by a text to the practical world; questioning, confirming, rejecting.¹

Historical and Biographical Perspective

Although my students will be familiar with Dr. Seuss as a children’s author, chances are they will know little of the man and his life. Because many of Dr. Seuss’ books were written as a result of personal or world-related events, my students must begin to look at his books through *his* eyes. The importance of individual experience is clearly at the heart of the unit so they must be awakened to the knowledge that Dr. Seuss has lived through almost all of the twentieth century, meaning he has experienced international conflicts such as World War I, WW II, racial discriminations, the nuclear arms race, and personal freedom debates as a boy, a young man, a soldier, and a mature adult. These experiences shaped who he was as a person, and likewise shaped his style of writing. Therefore, a short biographical sketch will be necessary to activate my students’ prior knowledge of these historical conflicts and connect to Geisel’s own personal perspective. Once armed with this information, they will be better prepared to tackle the implicit themes that arise within each of the chosen books.

The biographical sketch itself will not need to be lengthy as the real purpose will be to provide students with a historical perspective in which to think about *conflict* . As students read about the life of Theodor Geisel, they will have an accompanying worksheet with sections corresponding to each time period of Geisel’s life. This worksheet will guide whole class discussions and provide an opportunity for students to take notes on the various conflicts (internal and external) prevalent in each time period. For example, after reading about his early childhood, we will discuss the conflicts that occurred between his father, the brewer, and prohibitionists in his neighborhood, and Geisel’s German background and the growing anti-German sentiment in his neighborhood. By taking the time to address these issues early on, students will begin to open their eyes to the historical and personal conflicts that later became the foundation of Dr. Seuss’ “message books”.

Biographical Sketch

Dr. Seuss was born Theodore Seuss Geisel, the only son of Theodor Robert and Henrietta Seuss, on March 2, 1904. He grew up in the German-American town of Springfield, MA, where his father struggled to rise up through the ranks of the family’s brewing company.

As a boy, Geisel had to deal with three major obstacles within the changing face of his New England neighborhood: the threat of World War I, growing anti-German feelings, and the proposed Eighteenth Amendment banning the sale and consumption of alcohol. Despite these early obstacles, Ted was a popular classmate and as a senior in high school was voted ‘Class Artist and Class Wit’, a foreshadowing of things to come.

Upon his graduation, Geisel went to Dartmouth in 1921. He entered with a major in English, but soon began spending most of his time working on the humor magazine, *Jack O’Lantern* , as editor and contributing writer. He quickly made a name for himself among his fellow students and professors alike through his satirical cartoons and humorous essays. In the fall of 1925, Geisel continued his academic pursuits as a doctoral student of literature at Oxford. Although planning to become a college professor of English, Geisel found himself easily distracted and ultimately frustrated with his studies. One of his fellow Oxford classmates and

future wife, Helen Palmer, also encouraged him to “follow his natural inclinations away from academia.”² With his notebooks filled with doodles rather than notes, Geisel faced an overwhelming workload and impending failure as a doctoral student. In June of 1926, he decided to drop out of school and tour Europe for a year.

Geisel returned to New York in 1927 and married the love of his life, Helen Palmer. Geisel followed her previous nudgings toward a creative career by continuing with his love of satire and humor. He began writing for magazines such as *PM*, *Judge*, *Liberty*, *Vanity Fair*, *Life*, *Redbook*, and *Saturday Evening Post*. Although allowing the couple financial stability, this work did not create fame for the name of Geisel. Each of his humorous essays and cartoons was published under the name Seuss because the author himself stated that he wanted to save the name Geisel for later, more serious novels. After ten years of writing for these New York magazines, Seuss added the “Dr.” title to his pseudonym, and later quipped that “this misappropriation of the degree saved my father thousands of dollars.”³

While contributing to these magazines, Geisel also became a successful advertising cartoonist for Standard Oil of New Jersey, popularizing the insecticide known as Flit. He created millions of newspaper ads, magazine ads, booklets, window displays, posters, and even animated cartoons featuring the catch-phrase, “Quick, Henry, the Flit!” While enjoying the immediate success of his advertising, Geisel found his hands were soon tied because the exclusive Standard Oil contract forbade him from exploring other commercial ventures during his “down-time”. Geisel later explained his frustration in an interview for Dartmouth Alumni Magazine, “Flit being seasonal, its ad campaign was only run during the summer months. I’d get my year’s work done in about three months, and I had all this spare time and nothing to do.”⁴ Luckily, his lawyer found a loophole: they did not forbid him to publish children’s books. Geisel again comments on this unexpected foray into children’s literature. “I would like to say I went into children’s book work because of my great understanding of children. I went in because it wasn’t excluded by my Standard Oil contract.”⁵

In 1936, he busted onto the scene with his first children’s book, *And To Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*. He continued working on children’s books over the next six years, and in addition became an editorial cartoonist for *PM* magazine from 1940 to 1942.

In 1943 he began his duty in the Army making documentaries with Frank Capra in Hollywood. Over the next three years, Geisel advanced to the rank of lieutenant colonel and received the Legion of Merit for “Why We Fight”, a series of patriotic films which he produced during the war. Geisel spent some time after the war working in Japan on another documentary, and in 1954 became a foreign correspondent for *Life* magazine in Japan, where he developed great admiration and respect for the Japanese people. During his overseas assignment, Geisel spent a considerable amount of time visiting Japanese schools where he observed the exciting new concept of recognizing the importance of the individual. This idea of individual acknowledgement

(“A person’s a person no matter how small,”) remains the center of his book, *Horton Hears A Who*, which was published later that same year.

Back in the United States, Geisel responded to the need for a basal reader replacement after the initial “Why Johnny Can’t Read” crisis swept America. With Dick and Jane proving to be less than adequate in teaching America’s young readers, William Spaulding, Houghton Mifflin’s education director, persuaded Geisel to “write me a story that first-graders can’t put down!”⁶ Dr. Seuss made his first and most important contribution in 1957 with the publication of *The Cat in the Hat*. He later admitted, “It’s the book I’m most proud of because it had something to do with the death of *Dick and Jane* primers.”⁷ Because of the commercial and educational success of *The Cat in the Hat*, Random House began a Beginner Books division which Geisel helped to develop and expand over the years with many of his own titles.

In 1971, Geisel turned his focus from his Beginner Books to a series of “message books” dealing with controversial thematic material. Although often criticized for being political and moralistic, many of these books including *The Sneetches* (1961), *The Lorax* (1971), and *The Butter Battle Book* (1984) continued to win accolades for Dr. Seuss.

Dr. Seuss continued to write and enjoyed success until his death in 1991. With over 40 books to his name, Dr. Seuss has been called among other things, “the most useful children’s writer of our time.” 8

The “Message Books”

While often remembered for his clever rhyme schemes and imaginative vocabulary, Dr. Seuss has also left quite a remarkable legacy in his “message books” which address the universal and oftentimes controversial issues of our time. These are the books that will be the main focus of this unit, specifically: *The Sneetches*, *The Lorax*, *The Butter Battle Book*, *Horton Hears A Who*, and *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins*. When reading these books, there’s more than meets the eye. The themes vary from the obvious to the elusive, tempting the reader to take another look and find another meaning within the lines of the child-like wisdom which has come to characterize Dr. Seuss.

Many essays have explored the so-called “adult content” of these books. Scholars and book-lovers alike have found that a closer look at the works of Dr. Seuss reveal lessons in prejudice, ecology, nuclear war, civil rights, and individual freedoms. Geisel’s own stepdaughter and creator of the sculpture garden in the Dr. Seuss National Memorial commented on the many layers of her stepfather’s work. “I want people to leave taking Dr. Seuss’s work a little more seriously... I think a lot of people take Dr. Seuss’s work lightly -- it’s fluff, it’s cute. If you sit down and read his books carefully, they have so much more to them.”9

More to them indeed. A glance at a few memorable lines from these stories is enough to see the far-reaching implications of his books.

“Sneetches are Sneetches, And no kind of Sneetch is the best on the beaches.”

“UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.”

“Who’s going to drop it? Will you...? Or will he...? Wait and see...”

“A person’s a person. No matter how small.”

“I don’t know [why], but it’s one of the rules.”

Even Geisel himself has addressed the moralistic issues that seem to play a large part in his later books. In a *Life* magazine interview, he stated, “Kids can see a moral coming a mile off and they gag at it. But there’s an inherent moral in any story.”10 In another interview almost thirty years later, Geisel told *U.S. News and World*

Report , "I seldom start with [a moral], but when you write a kid's book, somebody's got to win. You find yourself preaching in spite of yourself."¹¹

Story Focus

The Sneetches

The theme of racial equality and acceptance is the thread that runs through *The Sneetches* (1961). The story depicts two groups of people: the Star-Belly Sneetches and the Plain-Belly Sneetches. The Star-Belly Sneetches look down upon their Plain-Bellied neighbors. "We're the best kind of Sneetch on the beaches... We'll have nothing to do with the Plain-Belly sort." This attitude is played out not only in words, but also in actions as the Plain-Belly Sneetches are ignored, dismissed, and segregated in everyday life. Sylvester McMonkey McBean arrives to the segregated beach and, for the cheap price of three dollars, guarantees to put stars on the Plain-Belly Sneetches. They quickly accept this new price of "equality" and soon a conflict arises because the Star-Belly Sneetches find that they are no longer different... and thus better. McBean this time offers to remove the stars from the original Star-Bellies for a ten-dollar fee. They embrace this plan to lose their original stars and differentiate themselves again, but soon in the culmination of the book, McBean's machine is removing and adding so many stars that the Sneetches can no longer tell or remember which is which. They ultimately (and wisely) come to the conclusion that, "Sneetches are Sneetches, And no kind of Sneetch is best on the beaches."

Thematic discussion around *The Sneetches* can easily focus on the civil rights movement of the 1960's, noting that the book was published in 1961, but also on other situations of injustice and prejudice throughout history. Reflecting on Geisel's own biography, one can note the persecution he felt over his German heritage as a young boy, and his opposition to anti-Semitism during the war. Of course, the hierarchy of seventh grade society can be addressed as well as the issue of acceptance based on "brand names" or in the case of the Sneetches themselves -- "stars" is brought to the forefront of the discussion.

It is interesting to note that the characters in *The Sneetches* have no ethnic qualities. They have no racially identifiable features. This specific omission could be attributed to pedagogical concerns of Seuss to simplify the matter, or simply to continue his pattern of creating imaginative characters that lie somewhere *between* the human and animal world, not clearly resting in either one. This observation can enliven a discussion about the purpose of the characters' "unethnicity" as well as the question of "What if?" What if Dr. Seuss had given the characters certain racial features? Would the theme of the story have remained the same? Would the theme have been as universally acceptable to all readers? Of course, the discussion must always return back to the basic plot: the unfair treatment of the Plain-Belly Sneetches based only on their outer differences. Whatever his purpose, this book does indeed make a clear statement about the treatment of "others" who look different from the majority.

The Lorax

The Lorax (1971), one of Seuss' favorites, focuses on current issues of ecology and environmental conservation. In this story, the Once-ler, a greedy capitalist, arrives to the land of the Truffula Trees. He looks through the beauty of the natural forest seeing only the opportunity for mass production of his sweater-like

Thneeds. Although warned by the Lorax, who speaks for the trees, the Once-ler continues to grow and expand his business by cutting down more and more Truffula Trees. "I meant no harm. I most truly did not. But I had to grow bigger. So bigger I got." Soon of course, the forest is emptied of the living creatures that depended on the Truffula Trees, and the Truffula Trees themselves. The Lorax leaves the smog infested, polluted land with a final word of "UNLESS" whose meaning is soon made clear to the young boy in the story and likewise the young reader waiting for the pieces to come together. "UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."

The Lorax easily conjures up themes of conservation, de-forestation, and pollution, but issues of capitalism and greed also rise up to the surface of the story. Seventh grade students studying the ecosystem and food webs can also point out the interdependence of the living things in the story and thus the severity of destroying the earth. Careful reflection on some of the more memorable lines of the story can help to engage young minds in thinking about the general theme of "rights". During the climax of his Thneed business, the Onceler chews out the Lorax, saying, "Well, I have my rights, sir, and I'm telling you I intend to go on doing just what I do!"

The Butter Battle Book

The *Butter Battle Book* (1984) highlights the theme of nuclear proliferation as two communities living on opposite sides of a wall determine each other to be an untrustworthy enemy based solely on their preference of bread and butter placement. This is an obvious allusion to the original culinary-warring countries of Lilliput and Blefuscu in the classic, *Gulliver's Travels*, in which these two countries engage in a war over an equally trivial argument of whether to break an egg on the large side or the small side. In Seuss' *Butter Battle Book*, the Yooks eat their bread with the butter side down while the Zooks prefer their bread with the butter on top. This minor difference begins a major conflict as the two groups fight to overcome the other's obvious wrong beliefs and practices. The conflict escalates throughout the story with the weapons becoming bigger and more technologically advanced until the Back Room Boys in each community create the Bitsy Big-Boy Boomeroo bomb to destroy the other community once and for all. The book ends with a stand-off on the wall and a small boy asking, "Who's going to drop it? Will you...? Or will he...? We'll see. We will see..."

Once again multiple themes can be found within the lines of *The Butter Battle Book*. While questions of the nuclear arms race and nuclear bomb threats seem obvious especially considering the time period in which it was written, themes of multiculturalism and acceptance can also be lifted from the plot. Discussions focusing on the shared humanity of the Yooks and the Zooks can accompany questions dealing with the minor differences of their cultures. The seventh grade social studies curriculum presents an in-depth look at culture culminating with an International Day celebration in June. By knowing the various aspects of culture and experiencing these differences within their own research and study, students can look at this particular story and note that people can be different without being enemies.

Horton Hears A Who

The rights of minorities form the basis of the 1954 book, *Horton Hears A Who*. In this story Horton the elephant hears a tiny voice emanating from a small speck of dust floating by. Intrigued, he listens and learns that there is an entire community, Whoville, complete with buildings and families and a working government living on this speck of dust. Horton vows to protect them from the other larger animals who laugh at the absurd possibility of life on a speck of dust. A few animals who wish to be rid of the entire ridiculous idea snatch the speck of dust and attempt to destroy it, but Horton, true to his word, searches far and wide for the small community all the while justifying his mission with the statement, "A person's a person. No matter how

small." When the animals are ready to throw the speck into a boiling kettle of Beezle-nut oil, Horton exhorts the entire community of Whoville to make themselves heard. Their first attempts are in vain, but finally with the missing "Yopp!" of a young lad added to the voices of the every Who in Whoville, "their voices were heard!" and Horton smiles and sums things up. "They've proved they ARE persons, no matter how small. And their whole world was saved by the Smallest of All!"

This book speaks to those without a voice. Seventh graders will have no trouble identifying with this fact as many of them are dealing with the issues of adolescence and their burgeoning independence. Although they are growing and maturing, they are still nonetheless dependent on their parents whom they sometimes see as sharing the characteristics of Horton's condescending animal friends. Along with the adolescent voice, discussions can center around other groups who have been silenced in the past. Again, reflecting on Geisel's own historical and personal perspective, connections can be made to his impressions of the post-war Japanese people and their struggle to find a voice as evidenced on the dedication page of the book itself: "For my great friend, Mitsugi Nakamura of Kyoto, Japan." And of course the thematic discussion would not be complete without referencing the struggle of the African Americans to find a voice in American society, and perhaps touching on the issue of abortion and the stance of the pro-life movement as they strive to speak for the unborn.

The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins

The 1938 book, *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins*, is not one of Dr. Seuss's controversial "message books"; however it does introduce some interesting themes of power and custom. The book is written as a literary fairy tale, and true to form, good versus evil is apparent from the first few pages. Perspective is also introduced with King Derwin, ruler of the Kingdom of Didd, looking down upon his subjects "feeling mighty important" while young Bartholomew looks up at the royal castle and "feels mighty small." The story begins as Bartholomew ventures into town anxious to sell his cranberries at the market. He is quickly halted as the King's entourage parades through the city and cries, "Hats off to the King!" Bartholomew obeys the command without question, but soon becomes the focus of the King's fury because just as soon as he removes one hat from his head, another one quickly appears. Although Bartholomew innocently searches for an explanation to appease the angry king, he is arrested and taken to the castle. Waiting to appear before the king, Bartholomew's nerves take hold of him, but he thinks to himself, "The King can do nothing dreadful to punish me, because I really haven't done anything wrong." This inner monologue does not pacify him for long, however, because at the King's request to remove his hat once more, Bartholomew answers, "I will -- but I'm afraid it won't do any good," and again he removes his hat in vain. After calling on the wisdom of his royal experts, King Derwin allows his haughty young nephew to try his hand at removing the hats. When he is unable to accomplish this task, the King calls on the Yeoman of the Bowmen and his royal magicians. With no success, he relies on the whispers of his nephew and orders Bartholomew to be executed by be-heading. Here enters Seuss's ironic "Catch-22". Bartholomew is facing execution **because he will not** (and more importantly, cannot) **remove his hat**, but the execution itself cannot happen **until he removes his hat**. When asked why, the executioner can only answer, "I don't know, but it's one of the rules. I can't execute anyone with his hat on." With his plans foiled again, the King follows his nephew's advice and orders Bartholomew to be pushed off the highest castle turret. In the last ditch attempts to save his own life, Bartholomew frantically begins to tear off his hats, which now number 450. Suddenly, the hats begin to change. They become grander and grander until Bartholomew emerges onto the highest turret wearing the most beautiful hat in the kingdom complete with feathered plumes and a gigantic ruby. Wilfred, the King's nephew, starts to push when the King stops him short, and chastises him for talking back. The King instead offers to buy Bartholomew's dazzling hat for five hundred gold pieces, and Bartholomew quickly acquiesces,

“Anything you say, Sire.” Bartholomew slowly removes this prized hat to sell to the King and realizes that at last his head is bare. The story closes with the entire kingdom of Didd attempting to explain this new mysterious occurrence by simply saying, “It just happened to happen and is not very likely to happen again,” and our young hero, Bartholomew, walking home five hundred hats lighter yet five hundred gold pieces richer.

While obviously longer and differing in style, *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins* also challenges students to uncover various themes about life. Because the particular themes in this book, however, are intertwined within the plot itself, it would be a good idea to spend some time discussing the plot first. Students should stop to consider: Why do the hats continue to appear on Bartholomew’s head? Why do the last few hats become grander and grander? Why does the parade of hats finally stop at 500? What principle of salvation, if any, keeps him alive?

Once the students have begun to grapple with the finer points of the plot, we can begin to explore the broader themes of the story starting with the fact that obsolete rules often lead to unfair cruelty, while also recognizing the fact that these same arbitrary rules did save Bartholomew from the executioner’s ax. Following this discussion of rules and their conflicting purposes, we can transition into the question of whether there is a need to look at rules to determine their validity in today’s society. Themes of power, command, and obedience can also lead to probing questions about historical figures and current leaders who hold power over others, leading back to Geisel’s own time in the military and his time observing foreign relations overseas. And of course the theme of rules and standards for decorum will emerge in the form of seventh grade questioning and vocal rebellion against those rules at school and at home that “just don’t make any sense!”

Classroom Strategies and Activities

We will begin the actual book focus of the unit by discussing one of Dr. Seuss’s classic and simple books, *Green Eggs and Ham*, as a class. This will allow me to introduce the students to the small group activities that they will be responsible for and to introduce the multiple themes and interpretations one can find in even the most elementary Dr. Seuss book. After reading all about Sam’s repetitive requests (“Will you eat them in a...?”) and his friend’s constant refusal to eat the detested “green eggs and ham”, we will answer a series of CMT-focused questions about main idea, theme, and author’s purpose. Then we will begin to discuss possible themes relating to the story. These themes can cover family issues such as proper parenting skills or a child’s predisposition to exert authority over his or her food. Is this how one should deal with a stubborn child? Is it normal for children to refuse to eat something “green”? We can also expand our interpretations to include specific 7th grade curricular ideas. Does Sam use appropriate techniques to *persuade* his young audience? Could he have used one or two of the appeals we learn about in class (appeal to reason, emotion, character)? Are there any life lessons to be learned about trying new things? The point that the students must realize is that, although the book was written using only 50 different vocabulary words, the plot lends itself to many thought-provoking themes. *Green Eggs and Ham* is more than a story about a kid who won’t eat something “gross”.

After this whole-class introductory example, students will be placed into five literature circles. Each literature circle will be given a different Dr. Seuss book to read and discuss as a group.

- *The Sneetches*
- *The Lorax*
- *The Butter Battle Book*
- *Horton Hears A Who*
- *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins*

After reading the book aloud (round robin style), each group will follow the modeled format by first discussing questions with a CMT critical stance focus (main idea, theme, and author's purpose) and then responding to these questions in writing. Possible CMT questions include the following:

- What does the author want you to know about human nature?
- According to the story, what human characteristics seem to be highly valued by the author?
- Do any of the characters learn a lesson? Explain.
- Would this lesson help you in your life? Why or why not?
- The author's purpose is to... I know this because...
- You can tell from the story that the author thinks...
- What does the author mean when he says...?

Of course, these questions will form an initial foundation for follow-up discussions where the small groups can begin to bring up the anomalies of each particular book, employing the six strategies of active readers which we practice all year long: predicting, connecting, questioning, visualizing, evaluating, and clarifying. This will allow the deeper questions of what doesn't make sense to surface, and invite the students to experiment with their own interpretive skills. Instead of reverting back to their earlier strategy of ignoring the anomalies or giving up and assuming that "It's too hard," or "I just can't get it!" the students will learn that it's okay to question the author / plot / characters. Finally, by offering up their own questions within a small literature circle, the students will see that multiple interpretations are possible and that successful interpretation comes from digging below the surface of the story.

Once the students have spent some time answering the prescribed questions and discussing their own

questions, each group will then generate a list of possible themes for their particular book using a t-chart to differentiate between explicit and implicit themes. This will allow for even more debate and discussion as the members of each group determine which themes are explicit, which are implicit, and why they belong under each heading. Following this categorization, the groups will write a summary of the book to share with the other groups, making sure to include only the important aspects of the story, saving their personal interpretations for the next set of group activities.

The next day the groups will reform; each member from the initial groups will come together to form five unique groups. Within these new groups, each representative will be considered the expert on his or her particular group's book (requiring each student to be a prepared, active, knowledgeable participator.) The reformed groups will begin a new week with each representative sharing the summary of his or her book. Students will then begin a discussion of the themes found in the different books, comparing and contrasting these themes in the form of a graphic organizer.

The culmination of the unit will consist of each collaborative group choosing one theme-related activity to cooperatively develop and present together.

Possible activities could include:

- writing and presenting an imaginary interview with Dr. Seuss
- developing and teaching part of a thematic lesson plan for pre-school students
- creating an inner monologue of Dr. Seuss to be read in tandem with one of his books
- imagining a dialogue between two of his characters talking about a thematic issue concerning them both

Appendix

The educational objectives of this unit address many aspects of the prescribed 7th grade reading comprehension framework.

A. Forming an Initial Understanding

1. Students will determine the main idea or theme within a written work.
2. Students will identify or infer important characters, setting, problems, events, relationships and

details within a written work.

3. Students will select and use relevant information in order to summarize each story.

B. Developing an Interpretation

1. Students will make connections between the text and outside experiences and knowledge.

2. Students will draw conclusions about the author's purpose in including or omitting specific details in a written work.

3. Students will use evidence from the text to draw and/or support a conclusion.

C. Demonstrating a Critical Stance

1. Students will evaluate explicit and implicit information and themes.

2. Students will select, synthesize and/or use relevant information within these written works to include in a response to or extension of the work.

3. Students will demonstrate an awareness of values, customs, ethics and beliefs included in a written work.

Name _____

Homeroom # _____

The Man Behind the Stories

Identifying the *Conflicts* within the Life of Theodor Seuss Geisel

-- Write down the various conflicts found within the biographical sketch of Dr. Seuss..

-- Identify each conflict as either internal or external and identify the characters involved..

I. Growing up in Massachusetts _____

- threat of World War I external _____ vs. _____

- growing anti-German feelings external _____ vs. _____

- _____ VS. _____

- _____ VS. _____

II. Pursuing Higher Education _____

- decision to finish his doctorate internal _____ vs. _____

- _____ VS. _____

- _____ VS. _____

- _____ VS. _____

III. Early Married Life and Early Jobs _____

- _____ VS. _____

- _____ VS. _____

- _____ VS. _____

- _____ VS. _____

IV. Time in the Military and Overseas _____

- _____ VS. _____

- _____ VS. _____

- _____ VS. _____

- _____ VS. _____

V. Success as a Children's Author _____

- _____ VS. _____

- _____ VS. _____

- _____ VS. _____

- _____ VS. _____

Notes

1. Rita Roth, *Of Sneetches and Whos and the Good Dr. Seuss*, ed. Thomas Fensch (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1997) 150.
2. Ruth K. MacDonald, *Dr. Seuss* (Boston: Twayne, 1988) 5.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
4. Edward Connery Lathem, *Of Sneetches and Whos and the Good Dr. Seuss*, ed. Thomas Fensch (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1997) 72.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
6. Judith and Neil Morgan, *Dr. Seuss and Mr. Geisel* (New York: Random House, 1995) 154.
7. Philip Nel, *Dr. Seuss: American Icon* (New York: Continuum, 2004) 3.
8. Morgan, *Op. Cit.*, p. 291.
9. Nel, *Op. Cit.*, p. 1.
10. Peter Buzel, *Of Sneetches and Whos and the Good Dr. Seuss*, ed. Thomas Fensch (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1997) 12.
11. Thomas Fensch, ed., *Of Sneetches and Whos and the Good Dr. Seuss* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1997) 125.

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