

Teaching “Death of a Starship Poet”

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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 “Death of a Starship of Poet” 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:

- 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?
- If you had the opportunity to travel to other planets, but that the trip would take years, would you do it? Why or why not?
- Imagine a future where it would be possible to remove the last month (or year!) of someone’s memory. If you took someone’s memories without their permission, how serious of a crime do you believe has been committed?
- What if all you memories from the last four weeks were deleted? What would you lose? How important are those memories to you?
- If you did not have to work to make money, what hobby would you devote the majority of your time to?
- Do you think that a future where everyone’s needs were taken care of and they did not have to have a job to pay for housing, food or other necessities would be a utopia?
- In a society where all needs were taken care of, would there still be crime?

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 “Death of a Starship Poet” 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:

- Snooty
- Heirloom
- Gregarious
- Transhuman
- Paramour
- Repertoire
- Affectation
- Oracle
- Ambient
- Artisan
- Cantos

“Death of a Starship Poet” Quiz

Name _____

- 1) What upsets the chef most about the murder on the starship? What would you expect to upset him more?
- 2) Jayla is not a police officer or a detective. Why is she chosen to investigate Mewlana’s death?
- 3) How worried are the passengers on the starship about dying? What has changed in their society from our society concerning death?
- 4) Mewlana is famous aboard the starship. What is she famous for?
- 5) Jayla is concerned that Mewlana’s murder was random. It would be much more difficult to discover the killer if Mewlana and the murderer were not connected. What clue does Jayla find which indicates that the murder was not random?
- 6) The poet Octavio warns Jayla to “Save yourself often.” In the context of this story, what is he really saying to her.
- 7) The future society of this story is obsessively protective of personal privacy. There are no cameras or other recording devices that Jayla can check to see where people were when Mewlana was murdered. She does find a public record, though, which allows her to advance her investigation. What records does she find and what do they tell her?
- 8) Mewlana has a chance to look at the part of the poem she wrote in between the time of her last save and the time she was murdered. She does not want to. Why? If you were her, would you read the poem?

“Death of a Starship Poet” Quiz Key

- 1) What upsets the chef most about the murder on the starship? What would you expect to upset him more? *He’s upset that his favorite knife was used for something as gross as a murder. You would expect him to be more bothered that a person was murdered, not that his knife was used for the crime.*
- 2) Jayla is not a police officer or a detective. Why is she chosen to investigate Mewlana’s death? *She is a memoirist, a person who gathers information and turns it into a story. These skills are the closest her society has to a detective.*
- 3) How worried are the passengers on the starship about dying? What has changed in their society from our society concerning death? *Death is much less of a worry for the people in this future because they have the opportunity to do a “backup” of themselves. This backup can be restored, and they can go on with their lives as if nothing had happened.*
- 4) Mewlana is famous aboard the starship. What is she famous for? *She is a well-respected poet. She won the ship-wide poetry competition the year before.*
- 5) Jayla is concerned that Mewlana’s murder was random. It would be much more difficult to discover the killer if Mewlana and the murderer were not connected. What clue does Jayla find which indicates that the murder was not random? *The fact that Mewlana’s poem is missing provides a motive for the murder. Her private work would not have been stolen from her room if the murder had been done randomly.*
- 6) The poet Octavio warns Jayla to “Save yourself often.” In the context of this story, what is he really saying to her. *He is telling her that someone might want to “kill” her. Of course, all that would “die” if she was murdered would be whatever she had learned in the time between when she’d done her last backup and when she was killed. If she waits too long to do her backup, she would be starting the investigation over again from the last part she remembered.*
- 7) The future society of this story is obsessively protective of personal privacy. There are no cameras or other recording devices that Jayla can check to see where people were when Mewlana was murdered. She does find a public record, though, which allows her to advance her investigation. What records does she find and what do they tell her? *The placement of people in the dining room was preserved from night to night. From that, Jayla saw that Rheinhold had been dining with Aphra who was a poet competing for the prize Mewlana was favored to win.*
- 8) Mewlana has a chance to look at the part of the poem she wrote in between the time of her last save and the time she was murdered. She does not want to. Why? If you were her, would you read the poem? *This is an interpretive question that can be answered either way. Some might choose not to read the poem because they feel it would be a form of cheating. After all, the person they are now would not exactly be the same person who wrote the work. Others would argue that they would read it because they did the work (even if they don’t remember it).*

“Death of a Starship Poet”

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)

- Write a narrative of what a day would be like on starship that you had to live on for over a year.
- Many of the passengers on the starship seem to be poets. Write a poem about living on a starship.
- Some people have argued that your memories are who you are. Do you believe this is true? Write about the relationship between your memories and your personality.
- Illustrate a key scene from the story in your journal. Explain why you chose this scene and why it is important to the story.

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?
- Although Jayla is investigating a crime that happened to someone else, the story is also about her. What did Jayla learn or how did she change because of the events of the story?
- Rheinhold does not consider himself to be a villain. How would the story and the interpretation of the events change if he told the story? Pay particular attention to how he justifies the murder of Mewlana.
- A subtheme within this murder story deals with the value of poetry in a society. What does the author do to highlight poetry as an important activity within the starship's world?
- What is the character of Rheinhold? Use quotes from the story to defend your description of him.
- The story makes an argument about the nature of a person and personality. What does the story say about personality. Explain how you decided this.