

Teaching “The Experience Arcade”

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Before Reading: **For more mature audiences. The story includes references to “cutting,” drinking and suicidal depression. May require trigger warnings.**

Flash Fiction. “The Experience Arcade” is one of several stories in the collection that falls into the category of “flash fiction.” Different publishers define flash fiction differently, but generally it is a story under 2,000 words. Some flash stories are under 100 words! This can be a useful story length to teach if you are interested in assigning a short fiction assignment. There are numerous sources for examples of flash fiction online, along with other sites that offer suggestions for writing them.

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 Experience Arcade” is a science fiction or fantasy.

“The Experience Arcade” also contains horror elements. A story can have horror elements and not be completely a horror story. I have found it useful to argue that any story whose general message is “Something awful out there is going to get you” is a horror story. This can be seen most clearly in the ending. If the “something horrible” is still out there, it’s a horror story. The movie, *Jaws*, for example, by that definition would be a horror story. There are still sharks out there! Many supernatural horror stories imply their horror theme by suggesting whatever the horror element is (like ghosts or monsters) exists. If there is one haunted house, then there may be others.

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 like scary stories? If you do, what do you like about them? If you don’t, why do you think horror movies and novels are so popular? What do other people like about them that you’re missing?
- If you had an opportunity to live in the world of any story you’ve read or seen, what world would you choose?
- Why do you think so many people spend so much of their time watching television or playing computer games rather than interacting with the rest of the world? Do you think this is related to the many people who don’t seem to be able to live without their phone?
- In the movie, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, aliens wipe out a person’s desires. The wiped person remembers who they are, but they don’t experience emotions. Why are emotions important? Why might someone argue we’d be better without them.

Background: “The Experience Arcade” makes reference to several horror stories: Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Pit and the Pendulum,” the history of Jack the Ripper, the movies, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Aliens*, *Friday the Thirteenth*, *Embrace of the Vampire* (This is a hard-R rated film and not to be recommended to high school students. Many students may be familiar with some of these titles.), *The Exorcist*, *The Shining*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Psycho* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. The 1956 version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is a very interesting film, and I have taught it to high school students.

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:

- Boulevard
- Crucifix
- Pendulum
- Gelatinous

“The Experience Arcade” Quiz

Name _____

- 1) Why is the “The Experience Arcade” so popular?
- 2) Some of the people want to get more for their time at the arcade and are willing to pay extra money for it. What do they seem to want more of?
- 3) The narrator has an attitude about the people he sees at the arcade. How would you describe his attitude and how did you decide on your choice?
- 4) What appears to be the narrator’s mood as he walks through the arcade? How did you decide?
- 5) The narrator tells the reader almost nothing about himself, but he does provide one detail that hints to his motivation for going to the arcade. What does he tell us about his past that reveals a possible motive for his final action?
- 6) The narrator chooses to pay the extra fees at “The Invasion of the Body Snatcher Experience.” Why does he choose this attraction?
- 7) What does the story seem to say about humanity? Argue for the rightness or wrongness of your answer.

“The Experience Arcade” Quiz Key

- 1) Why is the “The Experience Arcade” so popular? *People want to enter the world of scary stories they are familiar with. They like the idea of sharing with their friends what they did. The arcade may offer the same kind of attraction as a roller coaster or other thrill ride where the people have a chance to be scared but in a situation that is actually safe.*
- 2) Some of the people want to get more for their time at the arcade and are willing to pay extra money for it. What do they seem to want more of? *There are multiple approaches to this question, but the most obvious one is that they are seeking an experience that is even more real. This question can naturally lead to a discussion of how many people are wedded to their electronic devices and spend considerable time gaming. The gaming industry is working hard to make interaction with its games increasingly realistic. So why are people seeking reality through virtual worlds? Why is the world they already live in somehow not fulfilling enough.?*
- 3) The narrator has an attitude about the people he sees at the arcade. How would you describe his attitude and how did you decide on your choice? *Although the narrator never directly says, he clearly does not find the people around him to be admirable. All of his descriptions make everyone else seem sad or disgusting.*
- 4) What appears to be the narrator’s mood as he walks through the arcade? How did you decide? *His descriptions of other people and the intensity of his language suggest that he is depressed, alienated, and/or lonely.*
- 5) The narrator tells the reader almost nothing about himself, but he does provide one detail that hints to his motivation for going to the arcade. What does he tell us about his past that reveals a possible motive for his final action? *Near the end of the story the narrator tells the readers that he has scars on his arms under his sleeves. These may be from cutting himself or an attempted suicide. He says that other people may hear voices “that don’t go away,” but he also appears to be talking about himself. He sounds suicidal.*
- 6) The narrator chooses to pay the extra fees at “The Invasion of the Body Snatcher Experience.” Why does he choose this attraction? *The attraction will turn him into a “pod-person,” which would be a human being with all of his emotions wiped away. It sounds like the narrator is struggling with powerful, negative emotions that he wants to be rid of.*
- 7) What does the story seem to say about humanity? Argue for the rightness or wrongness of your answer. *This is an open-ended discussion questions. Some students may say the story suggests that humanity is perpetually seeking a more intense experience, and is not happy with a mundane life. Others might argue the story is a cautionary tale that exaggerates how people feel. The narrator is an example of what not to do. Whatever they say, a perceptive reader will recognize that this is not a happy story and whatever themes it has are negative.*

“The Experience Arcade” 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)

- What movies or books would you think would do well at an experience arcade (the story does not have to be a horror story)? What parts of the movie or book would you think would be the most popular part of it?
- How do you respond to a friend or acquaintance who appears depressed or makes self-destructive statements?
- Do you think that computer gaming, particularly virtual reality games, could be dangerous? Could they be helpful?
- Rewrite the end of the story so that the main character learns not to give up, but to embrace life and be more optimistic.
- Pick an image or scene from the story and illustrate it. Explain why you chose the image you did.

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?
- What is the effect of not naming the main character?
- The author chose to emphasize horror titles in “The Experience Arcade.” What is the effect of choosing these kinds of stories?
- Joseph Conrad wrote a short novel called *Heart of Darkness*. In it, he tried to explain why men are attracted to the jungle. He said it was because of “the fascination of the abomination.” Many people take that to mean that the things that are most horrible are also ones that draw our attention, like people slowing down to look at a car wreck. How does “the fascination of the abomination” work in “The Experience Arcade”?
- Although “The Experience Arcade” is a science fiction based on technologies that don’t exist yet, what realities about how people behave and the human condition does the story reveal?