

Teaching “Mars, Aphids and Your Cheating Heart”

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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 “Mars, Aphids and Your Cheating Heart” 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:

- A cynic is a person who believes that everyone acts in their self-interest, and that no one is selfless. Are you a cynic or do you have a more generous view of humanity?
- You have probably heard of the butterfly effect. It’s the idea that a hurricane could have been started by the single flap of a butterfly’s wing half a world away. Write about something momentous that happened in your life that you know started with something that ordinarily would be insignificant.
- How important are role models or heroes in your life? Describe someone in your life who you would like to be more like.
- Have you ever committed a “random act of kindness?” Has anyone ever done something nice for you for no reason at all? Describe how your world would change if everyone in it committed one random act of kindness a day.

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 “Mars, Aphids and Your Cheating Heart” 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:

- Minuscule
- Chronological
- Infinitesimal
- Irony
- Omniscient
- Self-awareness
- Palmistry
- Séance
- Luminosity
- Sentimental

“Mars, Aphids and Your Cheating Heart” Quiz

Name _____

- 1) The story says that you are omniscient. What abilities does the story say you possess?

- 2) Who hired Jaydee Janac, and what is Jaydee supposed to do?

- 3) The story says “Bennett doesn’t see irony between his behavior and his suspicions.” What is the irony that Bennett misses?

- 4) Jaydee is a cynic. The story says “people no longer impress him.” What in Jaydee’s experience would cause him to lose his respect for people?

- 5) Linda does not believe that the psychic, Mark Tiggs, is for real, but she goes to him anyway. Why?

- 6) What does Jaydee believe will happen to Linda after he gives his report to Linda’s husband?

- 7) Who is John Carter and why is he important to Jaydee?

- 8) Explain the relationship between Mars, the aphid and a “cheating heart” from the title.

“Mars, Aphids and Your Cheating Heart” Quiz Key

- 1) The story says that you are omniscient. What abilities does the story say you possess? *The story says that the reader knows everything that has happened and is going to happen. It says that “no part is unknown to you.” It also says that you can see everything in detail.*
- 2) Who hired Jaydee Janac, and what is Jaydee supposed to do? *A man named Bennett believes that his wife is cheating on him, so he hired Jaydee to get the evidence to prove it. It appears that Bennett wants photographs of his wife cheating on him.*
- 3) The story says that “Bennett doesn’t see irony between his behavior and his suspicions.” What is the irony that Bennett misses? *Bennett has been having an affair with a woman in Santa Fe for the last thirteen years. It is ironic that he is cheating on his wife, but the possibility that she is cheating on him makes him angry.*
- 4) Jaydee is a cynic. The story says that “people no longer impress him.” What in Jaydee’s experience would cause him to lose his respect for people? *The story gives a series of examples of people who Jaydee knows who have behaved badly. His job is to find out bad things that people do. This would tend to make anyone cynical.*
- 5) Linda does not believe that the psychic, Mark Tiggs, is for real, but she goes to him anyway. Why? *Her mother died recently and her husband seems distant and unaffectionate. She is unhappy enough in her life that any hopeful news, even if it is false, would feel comforting.*
- 6) What does Jaydee believe will happen to Linda after he gives his report to Linda’s husband? *Jaydee suspects that the husband will kill her. He has no hard evidence, but the story says that he “hears” the gun in Bennett’s voice.*
- 7) Who is John Carter and why is he important to Jaydee? *John Carter is the hero in a series of novels by Edgar Rice Burroughs. When Jaydee was young, he admired the character for finding love and becoming a prince. The more perceptive answers will point out that Carter is heroic in ways that Jaydee is not. John Carter is a part of a childhood dream that Jaydee had about his own life.*
- 8) Explain the relationship between Mars, the aphid and a “cheating heart” from the title. *There are numerous ways to answer this question. The most literal ones will point out that if Mars hadn’t become slightly brighter when it did, that Jaydee would not have thought about what it means to be a hero. If the ladybug hadn’t eaten the aphid, it wouldn’t have had the energy to fly at the moment it did and to land on Linda’s cheek. If the ladybug hadn’t landed on her cheek, she wouldn’t have paused and seen Jaydee in the bushes. If their eyes hadn’t met at just that moment, and if Jaydee wasn’t in the sentimental mood he was in, he would have never warned her about her husband. Some students might point out that the end of the story allows Jaydee to be a little heroic. Weaker answers will point out that all the elements are related but not explain them as well.*

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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)

- If you were all-knowing, what would you most like to know? What are the unanswered questions that omniscience would give you a chance to answer.
- The story suggests that a person can change if given the right circumstances. Jaydee, for example, warns both Linda and the psychic, which isn't something he would normally do. A philosopher once said, “You can change, but you can't be what you ain't.” Do you believe that people can become different, or are the philosophers right?
- The story ends on a hopeful note. Rewrite it so that it is more cynical.

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?
- Jaydee's character is multi-faceted. Discuss the multiple ways he can be described.
- How does is the planet Mars elevated to the level of a symbol in the story? What other parts of the story can be interpreted symbolically?
- Some stories emphasize plot (the interest in the story mostly resides in “what happens next?”). Other stories emphasize character. Others are mostly about their ideas. What appears to be the primary focus of “Mars, Aphids and Your Cheating Heart?”