

Teaching “The Continuing Saga of Tom Corbett, Space Cadet”

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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 “The Continuing Saga of Tom Corbett, Space Cadet” is a science fiction or fantasy.

Background to the story. Although the story can be understood without knowing who Tom Corbett was, the background can be helpful.

In 1948, famed science fiction author, Robert Heinlein published a YA novel entitled “Space Cadet” which is a story about Matt Dodson who joins the space patrol. The events in the novel draw heavily on Heinlein’s understanding of military academies, and tracks Matt’s training. Along the way, Matt learns numerous lessons and matures into the kind of military officer that Heinlein admired.

The success of the book inspired a spin-off television series called “Tom Corbett: Space Cadet,” which ran on various networks from 1950-55. There were also comics, toys, a radio show and a series of nine books about Tom’s adventures.

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:



- What are your dreams and what are you doing to achieve them?
- How do you see your world compared to how you think your parents or other adults see it?
- What do you think is the importance of an imagination and day dreaming?
- What is a hero? What does it mean to be heroic?
- Have you ever been made fun of because of something you liked or cared about?
- How are “intellectuals” treated at your school? Is being smart in math or science respected by other students?
- How would you help someone who you knew was depressed?
- Imagine that you have been offered your heart’s desire, the one thing that would make you happy. Would you be willing to give it up to save someone else? What do you think it means to make a sacrifice?

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 “The Continuing Saga of Tom Corbett, Space Cadet” 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:

- View-Master
- Medallion
- Unencumbered
- Subliminal
- Klaxon
- Refurbish
- Methodically
- Tripe
- Ramjet
- Culvert
- Morse code
- Patronizing
- Pneumatic
- Pleiades

“The Continuing Saga of Tom Corbett, Space Cadet” Quiz

Name _____

- 1) How did Tomika feel about her nickname at first, and how did that change?
- 2) One definition of “conflict” in a story is that someone wants something, something stands in the way, and something valuable is at stake. What does Tomika want? What stands in the way? Why is it valuable to her?
- 3) How would you describe Tomika’s relationship with her parents? Give an example to support your answer.
- 4) Why does Ms. Schneider discourage Tomika from reading the Tom Corbett books?
- 5) Although Tomika understands Ms. Schneider’s arguments, she likes the books anyway. How does she justify to herself her continued interest in the books?
- 6) Although Tomika’s dream seems impossible, she takes actions to make it come true. What actions does she take to achieve her dream?
- 7) There are hints in the story that Tomika’s daydreams may be reality. Considering how the story ends, what clues are in the story earlier that make the ending seem possible?
- 8) Why does Tomika give up her spot in the Space Academy to Jacob?
- 9) If you were in Tomika’s position, would you accept an offer to leave Earth and join the Space Patrol? Why or why not?

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Quiz Key

- 1) How did Tomika feel about her nickname at first, and how did that change? *At first she embraced the name (she made her own Solar Guard uniform in sixth grade), but by high school, she tried to look more normal. It didn't matter. The kids already thought of her as “SC,” the space cadet.*
- 2) One definition of “conflict” in a story is that someone wants something, something stands in the way, and something valuable is at stake. What does Tomika want? What stands in the way? Why is it valuable to her? *This definition of conflict can be a valuable way to teach the concept to students. Many stories can be analyzed this way. Tomika wants to go to space and join the Solar Guard. What stands in the way is that as far as she (or the reader) knows, the Solar Guard is a fiction. Tomika's desire to be a leader and to serve her community or to serve a noble purpose are at stake. Some students may point out that she finds her real life mundane, so what is at stake is her own role in society or her urge to get away from her society.*
- 3) How would you describe Tomika's relationship with her parents? Give an example to support your answer. *Her parents barely acknowledge she is around. They only talk about real estate, and at one point they don't really hear what she is saying to them when she says she has joined a terrorist cell. Certainly if she leaves at the end of the story, the love of her parents won't be something she misses.*
- 4) Why does Ms. Schneider discourage Tomika from reading the Tom Corbett books? *The teacher feels the books are sexist, and that there are better models for Tomika to look up to.*
- 5) Although Tomika understands Ms. Schneider's arguments, she likes the books anyway. How does she justify to herself her continued interest in the books? *Tomika reads for the adventure. It doesn't matter to her that the characters are all male and have sexist attitudes. She puts herself in the character's place and ignores the pronouns. Librarians will tell you that Tomika mirrors what many girls do. She reads books with both male and female lead characters equally. Boys have a tendency not to do that and will only read books with male leads.*
- 6) Although Tomika's dream seems impossible, she takes actions to make it come true. What actions does she take to achieve her dream? *She made a sign on the hill that would be visible from above; she has been sending Morse code signals to the sky with lasers; and she made a website with a application form for the Solar Guard.*
- 7) There are hints in the story that Tomika's daydreams may be reality. Considering how the story ends, what clues are in the story earlier that make the ending seem possible? *Her dreams of the admission committee are consistent. She gets a reply on her website that says, “We are looking for a recruit. Watch the skies,” and Jacob disappears right after she has a dream about the Solar Guard taking him as a recruit instead of her.*
- 8) Why does Tomika give up her spot in the Space Academy to Jacob? *Lots of possible answers here. The most common might be that she feels sorry for him. Other possibilities are that she wants to protect him, that he expressed a desire to be somewhere else, or that she believes his obvious achievement in math make him a better candidate.*
- 9) If you were in Tomika's position, would you accept an offer to leave Earth and join the Space Patrol? Why or why not? *This is purely an opinion answer. Good for discussion.*

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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.

Classroom Activity:

As of the writing of this activity sheet, YouTube contained several complete episodes of the Tom Corbett television shows. Most students will find the acting, writing, sets and special effects to be exceedingly clunky and dated. A useful way to show one of the old episodes is to ask the students to watch and then draw conclusions about life in the 1950s, when these episodes were viewed.

Watching an old episode and then reporting on it could also be an extra-credit assignment or homework.

- What does the episode tell you about television in the 50s?
- Keeping in mind that the Tom Corbett television show existed before there was a space program, what attitudes about science and space flight are revealed in the episode?
- In the 1950s, what age group do you think the show was aimed at?
- What might the right-aged viewer get from the show? What was good about it for the right-aged viewer?
- What shows were your favorites when you were young? Can you watch them with the same enjoyment now?

Journal Prompts (some of these prompts could be turned into formal essays)

- Think about the movies you watched and books you read when you were young. If you could live in the world of any of them, which would you choose and why?
- Pretend you are Tomika. Write a letter to the bullies on the bus about why they should be Jacob’s friends instead of tormenting him.
- What advice would you give Tomika for dealing with her parents?
- Write a narrative about what happens the first day that you board a spaceship bound for the Space Academy like Tomika does at the end of the story.
- Write a short review of “The Continuing Saga of Tom Corbett, Space Cadet” that would encourage someone to read it (no spoilers!).
- Draw the story as a graphic novel, or pick a favorite scene and illustrate it.
- What opportunities exist in our world for a person to be heroic? What jobs seem to need heroes to fill them?

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 kind of person is Tomika? How does the author reveal her character? Use quotes to support your answer.
- The admissions officers for the Space Academy tell Tomika, “We decided that a candidate who would sacrifice her dream to save someone else is exactly the kind of person the Solar Guard should recruit.” They had chosen her first. What actions and characteristics did she display that made them choose her before she gave up her place to Jacob?
- How does the narrator’s voice and the setting contribute to the story’s tone? Identify the tone in your answer and use specific examples to support your choice.
- How is the story structured? How does this structure contribute to the story’s meaning?
- The story contains numerous minor characters. How do the minor characters contribute to the story’s overall meaning?
- What objects in the story seem symbolic? What do you think they symbolize, and why did they strike you as being more than just literal?
- Although “The Continuing Saga of Tom Corbett, Space Cadet” is a science fiction, it has several themes that deal with what it means to be a good human being. State one of those themes, and support your answer from evidence within the text.