

***Exploring Child Abuse in The Glass Castle Through a Mock Trial: Mrs. And Mrs. Walls vs. The Department of Child and Family Services***

Time: 3 50-minute class periods

Setting: 9<sup>th</sup> grade World Literature Classroom, 22 students

**Theory**

1. Using dramatic activities in the English classroom encourages students to personally experience and engage with the characters and themes of a story. According to Jacqueline Podolski, a middle school English teacher and member of the NCTE, “Through drama, students create a new world in which the characters, themes, and motivations of the novel combine with and affect students' understanding of the world in which they live.” In this lesson, students reenact a court scene in order to reflect on and debate the issue of child abuse/neglect in Jeannette Walls’ memoir *The Glass Castle*. Students will apply critical thinking skills as they gather textual evidence to support and develop their arguments.

Through reenactment, students practice what Jim Burke refers to as the “Atticus Finch curriculum” of learning by “walking around in another’s shoes (Burke 11). Aside from this lesson’s value as an after-reading extension activity, it provides an outlet for students to be creative and imaginative, “As school arts and humanities programs face increased cutbacks, literature becomes, in many schools, the last bastion of the imagination” (Burke 73).

2. Students will be expected to have finished reading the text, know the major events of the memoir, and have a comprehensive understanding of its major themes and motifs. (See “Novel Summary” page for detailed content description). Students will also be expected to draw on the general background knowledge related to the process of a court trial.

3. Besides *The Glass Castle*, there are no supplemental content materials used in this lesson

4. This lesson comprises the final three days of a three-week unit on *The Glass Castle*. It serves as an end-of-unit activity, as well as a transition into the next novel, *Chinese Cinderella*. The issue of what constitutes child abuse will be a major point of discussion in *Chinese Cinderella* also.

**OBJECTIVES**

- Students will create interpretive presentations of literary characters.
- Students will articulate and write persuasive arguments about whether or not Mr. and Mrs. Walls are guilty of child abuse.
- Students will find, interpret, and manipulate textual evidence to support one side of the argument.

**PREPARATION**

- Prepare cards with trial roles and responsibilities
- Make photocopies of the mock trial worksheets
- Become familiar with the mock trial procedure.

**PROCEDURE****Day 1**

1. Explain the mock trial activity to the class: Students will participate in a trial, in which Mr. and Mrs. Walls are being tried for child abuse by the Department of Child and Family Services. *2 minutes*
2. Explain the different roles students will portray during the trial. Assign roles to students by randomly distributing cards that state their role and responsibilities. (see “Roles of the Members of a Trial” handout ) *5-7 minutes*
3. Give students who are assigned to be lawyers either the “Prosecution Attorney’s Duties” handout or “Defense Attorney’s Duties “ handout so that they have a better idea of their specific expectations. *2 minutes*
4. Since all other students will act as a member of the jury, distribute and discuss the “And the Verdict Is...” worksheet . *3 minutes*
5. Once characters and roles have been assigned, discuss the expectations and requirements for the trial (See Trial Rubric) *8 minutes*
6. When students feel comfortable with the expectations for the project, invite them to begin their research and outline their cases for the mock trial. Lawyers should be preparing their arguments, witnesses

should be finding quotes and developing their stances, jury members should begin developing in-depth questions.

7. Hand out an agenda so that students know the timeframe for the mock trial.

## **Day 2**

1. Allow students to continue preparing for their roles in the trial.
2. The teacher should meet with both sets of lawyers to review their arguments.
3. Students who are members of the jury should finish preparing questions.
4. Students who will act as witnesses should finish finding quotes that will help them answer prosecution/defense questions in character.
5. During the last 20 minutes of class, the teacher should hold a mini-rehearsal and walk through all stages of the trial with students.
6. The teacher should go over the formalities of courtroom procedure and terminology.

## **Day 3**

1. Students present their arguments, following the guidelines and agenda presented in previous sessions.
2. At the end of the first day of presentations, collect the “And the Verdict Is...” forms and let the students know that the verdicts will be delivered the following day.

## **DISCUSSION IDEAS**

- Is purposely choosing to be homeless a form of neglect?
- Why does Jeannette refuse to blame her parents?
- Are Mr. and Mrs. Walls equally guilty or not guilty?
- If they are found guilty, how should Mr. and Mrs. Walls be punished?

## **BILINGUAL/ESL ACCOMMODATION**

ESL students will not have to speak during the presentation if he/she is not yet comfortable doing so, however he/she will be expected to turn in a modified “And the Verdict Is...” worksheet. If the student does not have a speaking role, he/she should act as the “clerk” and time the lawyers’ arguments

**AAVE:** Standard English is not required for any of the assessments in this lesson. However, students should do their best to recreate the style of language used by characters in *The Glass Castle* while speaking as a character.

**SPED ACCOMMODATION: Autism Spectrum Disorder**

Since students with Autism Spectrum Disorders often struggle to adapt to changes in routine, this lesson is likely to be challenging for them. In order to prepare the student, the teacher can provide a “Change in Routine Card” a few days before the lesson and remind the student every day leading up to the lesson that there is going to be a different kind of activity going on. It might be helpful to provide the student with an advanced copy of the lesson plan so that they can better prepare for what to expect (Adreon).

Moreover, because the classroom is likely to become a bit chaotic during the student preparation day, it would be beneficial to have a space in the room where the student can go to “reset” for a few minutes if he/she begins to feel overwhelmed. In general, it is a good idea to have a “reset zone” in the classroom. All students should be welcome to spend a few minutes in the “reset zone” if they are having an especially tough day.

**ASSESSMENT**

- Listen for comments that indicate students are identifying specific evidence from the text. (Use trial rubric).
- Use the “And the Verdict Is...” worksheet and the corresponding discussions to listen for further connections to the texts in the mock trials.

**EXTENSION IDEAS**

- As a class, view an appropriate trial from TV, such as *Law and Order*, or a movies, such as *Inherit the Wind* or *To Kill a Mockingbird*.
- Film the trial and upload it to You Tube for parents to view.

**SOURCES**

Huge thanks to Mrs. Jacqueline Podolski for sharing all of the handouts and rubrics for this lesson.

Thanks to Jim Burke for sharing his classroom experience of creating a mock trial for the characters in *Lord of the Flies*.

Thanks to Diane Adreon for her classroom strategies for students with Autism.

**RESOURCES AND REFERENCES**

Adreon, Diane. "Strategies to Help Students with Asperger Syndrome in School." *Autism Society* (2009). Web. Dec.-Jan. 2010. <<http://www.education.com/reference/article/strategies-help-asperger-school/?page=2>>.

Burke, Jim. *The English Teachers' Companion: a Complete Guide to Classroom, Curriculum, and the Profession*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2008. Print.

Podolski, Jacqueline. "Literary Characters on Trial: Combining Persuasion and Literary Analysis - ReadWriteThink." *Homepage - ReadWriteThink*. National Council on Teacher Education, 2010. Web.

10 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/literary-characters-trial-combining-799.html?tab=3#tabs>>.

Walls, Jeannette. *The Glass Castle: a Memoir*. New York: Scribner, 2005. Print.

## ILLINOIS STATE STANDARDS

**4.A.4b** Apply listening skills in practical settings (e.g., classroom note taking, interpersonal conflict situations, giving and receiving directions, evaluating persuasive messages). *Students who play the role of witness will listen to the lawyers and respond with an answer appropriate for their character.*

**4.B.4b** Use group discussion skills to assume leadership and participant roles within an assigned project or to reach a group goal. *All students will be randomly assigned roles to play during the trial. The group of students who play the lawyer roles will assume a leadership position in this lesson.*

**4.B.4c** Use strategies to manage or overcome communication anxiety and apprehension (e.g., developed outlines, note cards, practice). *Students will be encouraged to use note cards or legal pads to reference during their oral presentation.*

**4.B.4a** Deliver planned informative and persuasive oral presentations using visual aids and contemporary technology as individuals and members of a group; demonstrate organization, clarity, vocabulary, credible and accurate supporting evidence. *Students will use legal terminology during the trial, provide textual evidence for their arguments, and present their information in the form of a formal legal defense.*

## REFLECTION

I was inspired to create this lesson after reading about Jim Burke's experience with *The Lord of the Flies* trial. Although Burke's version of this lesson took place over several weeks, I think students will have had enough experience with the novel to carry out the trial over the course of three days. I think the concept of students reenacting a trial based on issues in the text is an innovative alternative for a formal, summative assessment. I'm looking forward to using this lesson in my classroom.

Although I really like the concept for this lesson, I know it is a difficult procedure to follow. Even though I have an understanding of how the lesson should go, it is very difficult to convey it in a written procedure. If the main teacher had to be absent, a substitute teacher would struggle to carry out the lesson. I did my best to address this problem by making the accompanying handouts very explanatory.