

Forest Activity: The Forest as Inspiration for Literature

Objective: After reading several stories, novels, or plays at their grade level, students will analyze what role the forest played as a setting, a character, or a symbol in the work and in the culture of the time in which it was written. (In lower grades all students can read one story or book together; in upper grades, students could choose a work to read analyze and present to the class, or complete one of the suggested activities below).

Time Required: varies with age level from one 15-20 minute period to a 50-minute period within the reading of a chapter book or novel containing reference to a forest to a unit on themes in literature with reports on separate books or stories. This lesson is meant to be an addition to those done when reading a selection from your curriculum, which may be one of the titles below, or one related in theme or content.

Discussion points: Older students could discuss

- Why the fairy tales, with the forest so often portrayed as a symbol of chaos and danger, are so potent in our memories.
- What language is used to describe the wilderness? What does that say about the beliefs of the describers or listeners of the time?
- Of what things or ideas has the wilderness been a symbol?
- Can you trace this line of stories back through European history (legends, myths, fables)?
- What lingering attitudes or feelings do we have about the ‘wilderness’?
- What other tales, myths, legends, and stories do you know in which the forest is a symbol of something evil or dangerous?
- What stories do you know in which the forest is something benign or positive?
- What stories from non-european cultures feature the forest as a setting or character? What is the feeling toward the forest in the stories and in the cultures?

Suggested Works:

Early Elementary:

- Berenstain, Stan. *Berenstain's Bears and the Ghost of the Forest*. Random House, Inc., 1988.
- Frost, Robert. *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*. Dutton children's Books, 1978.
- Grimm, Jacob Ludwig Wilhelm K. Grimm. *Little Red Riding Hood*. Holiday House, 1987.
- Lesser, Rita and Zelinsky, Paul O. (Illustrator), *Hansel and Gretel*. Penguin, USA, 1999
- James Marshall (Illustrator). *Goldilocks & the Three Bears*. The Penguin Group, 1997.
- Milne, A.A. *The Complete Tales of Winnie the Pooh*. Penguin, USA.,1996.
- Salter, Felix. *Bambi: A Life in the Woods*. Pocket Books, 1982.

Late Elementary:

- Irving, Washington. *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow and Other Stories* (Rip van Winkle). Viking Penguin, 1999.
- Lesser, Rita and Zelinsky, Paul O. (Illustrator), *Hansel and Gretel*. Penguin, USA, 1999. Two children are lost in the woods and encounter a witch.
- McGovern, Ann. *Robin Hood of Sherwood Forest*. Scholastic, inc., 1987. Outlaws in medieval England live in the forest.

- Paulsen, Gary. *Hatchet*. (English, Spanish, and audio) Aladdin, 1996. A thirteen-year-old boy is lost in the woods for 54 days after a plane crash. He has only a hatchet to help him survive.
- Wilder, Laura Ingalls. *Little House in the Big Woods*. Harper Collins Children's Books, 1976. Pioneers carving out a home in the woods
- Grahame, Kenneth. *Wind in the Willows*. Barnes & Noble Books, 1995. The animals are warned not to go into the 'wild woods.'

Middle/Junior High:

- London, Jack. *Call of the Wild*. Simon and Schuster Children's, 1999. A dog is taken back to his wild roots.
- Golding, Arthur. *Lord of the Flies*. Putman Publishing Group, 1997. Boys' social organization breaks down to savage behavior when they are stranded on an isolated island.
- *Robin Hood*. There are many versions of this at various reading levels. The forest is a haven of safety for a noble thief and his band. Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* also has sections on Robin Hood and the forest.

High School:

- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. Dover Publications, 1991. A man finds a wildness in his own heart and in the colonialism of Africa.
- Cooper, James F. *Last of the Mohicans, The Deerslayer, and The Pathfinder*. The morality of the wilderness is superior to the hypocritical morality of 'civilization.'
- Dante. *The Inferno*.
- Raffel, Burton (translator). *Beowulf*. Mass Market Paperback, 1999.
- Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Macbeth meets three outcast women in the woods. Burnham Woods comes to Dunsinane, and terms of the forest are used metaphorically throughout.
- Shakespeare, William. *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Humans become enchanted at night in the forest by magical creatures good and bad.
- Thoreau, Henri David. *Walden, or Life in the Woods*. Dover Publications, 1995.

Suggested Written Activities:

Students can demonstrate their understanding by writing an essay about the role and meaning of the forest in their reading matter. They may refer to the puritan attitude and other roots of the portrayal of the forest in their book or story, such as the medieval European tales, the Greek myths, Norse Sagas, American Transcendentalism and Manifest Destiny, or biblical sources.

Students can demonstrate their understanding of the theme 'wilderness' as treated by various authors by writing a poem that depicts the role of wilderness, either in their literature or in their personal experience.

Students can do a comparative analysis of two works in which the forest is depicted. In the elementary grades this could be a discussion about the forest in two or three different stories.

Students can talk or write about how the forest is viewed today as compared to the 17th through the 19th century, including comments about the economic, political, and aesthetic issues related to conservation and exploitation of resources.

Non-written activities:

For lower elementary and/or for students who need and like alternative methods of expressing themselves:

Students can paint a picture to illustrate their book that shows how the forest is depicted. Mood and feeling can be expressed with line, color, value, shape, and rhythm.

Students can invent a board game that involves travelling through a forest as depicted in an interpretation of 'wilderness' that includes the dangers alluded to in the text.

Students can act out a play version of the story, adapting dialog or inventing their own dialog, following an outline of scenes.

Assessment:

Student work should reflect an understanding of the theme of wilderness as assigned, and contain all the elements of good writing, speaking, or other skills involved in their task. Older students' work should reflect some comparative analysis and/or research into history, philosophy, and literature.

Illinois Goals and Standards addressed:**English Language Arts**

Goal 2: Read and understand literature representative of various societies, eras, and ideas.

Standard A: Understand how literary elements and techniques are used to convey meaning.

- **Late Elementary: 2.A.2b:** Describe how story elements are used in literature to create meaning.
- **Middle/Junior High: 2.A.3b:** Describe how the development of theme, character, plot, and setting contribute to the overall impact of a piece of literature.
- **Early High: 2.A.4a:** Analyze and evaluate the effective use of literary techniques (figurative language, allusion, dialogue, description, symbolism, word choice, dialect) in classic and contemporary literature.
- **Late High: 2.A.5d:** Evaluate the influence of historical context on form, style, and point of view for a variety of literary works.

Standard B: Read and interpret a variety of literary works.

- **Early Elementary: 2.B.1b:** Identify common themes in literature from a variety of eras.
- **Late Elementary: 2.B.2b:** Identify and explain themes that have been explored in literature for different societies and eras.
- **Middle/Junior High: 2.B.3b:** Compare and contrast common literary themes across various societies and eras.
- **Early High School: 2.B.4b:** Analyze form, content, purpose, and major themes of American literature and literature of other countries in their historical perspectives.
- **Late High School: 2.B.5b:** Apply knowledge gained from literature as means of understanding contemporary and historical economic, social, and political issues and perspectives.