

The Prairie Life: *The Sea of Grass*

Introduction

This lesson is part of a unit on prairie life. Students should spend three days watching *The Sea of Grass* in a directed environment. Each should receive a viewing guide, watch a specific segment of the video each day, fill out their viewing guide, and participate in a discussion.

This lesson is geared to high school juniors in an honors English class. The video itself would probably not lend itself to a level much lower than eighth grade for learning purposes, but it is a good story to learn about frontier life. When they watch this video, they should just have completed reading *O Pioneers!* by Willa Cather. After watching, they should write a contrast/comparison essay.

Time

This lesson will take three class periods.

Materials

You will need: a TV/VCR; a copy of the video *The Sea of Grass* available at some video rental places and recently made available in mail order catalogues such as *Critic's Choice*; copies for each student of "O Pioneers!—Elements of the Novel," "Vocabulary Terms for Study of the Novel," and "*The Sea of Grass*: A Viewing Guide." The vocabulary terms and the Elements will have been done as the novel was read, but students will need these to have a clue for filling out the viewing guide.

Objectives

Students will be able to: recognize and point out the importance of the environment, and how it was protected or exploited; explain problems faced by ranchers and "squatters"; pick out important aspects of the video and the book they read in order to write a comparison/contrast essay; contribute to the

discussion of the various elements of the novel as they are manifested on the screen.

Procedure

By now students should be familiar with the elements of the novel, but they should be "warned" to get theirs out for quick reference if they feel the need. Directions on the viewing guide should be read together to be sure each student understands. Characters should be named aloud so there is no chance of mistaken identity. Students should already be attuned to thinking of the land as a character because it is the main character in the Cather novel. The first 29 minutes of the video will be shown and then stopped for discussion. Allow a couple of minutes to be sure all are through writing, and then ask for responses to the guide in the order listed. This should be repeated the second day. On the third day the students should be ready to begin naming ways they can compare the video and the book.

Evaluation of this activity will be through the class discussions, the filled-in viewing guide, and the essays graded according to the Analytical Rating Guide (ARG).

For students who have trouble grasping things, line ten chairs up in front of your room. Have twenty kids sit on them to represent an urban population and then have four kids sit on them to represent a rural population. Question how life would be different for each of these groups regarding conflict, land use, movement, and private space.

This lesson can be expanded by the reading of any of a number of essays dealing with land use, the struggles between farmers and ranchers, land management, production and consumption, and numerous other choices. Students could also pursue the influence of Gifford Pinchot, Wendell Berry, and Aldo Leopold on land management. □

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A horse reaper on the Great Plains in Nebraska, circa 1890.

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Sodhouse and well in Custer County, Nebraska, circa 1890.

The Sea of Grass: A Viewing Guide

Viewing Guide - Day One

You will be viewing *The Sea of Grass*, a black and white movie that deals with the very basic conflict between farmers and ranchers in the new territories. It will take parts of three class periods to watch the movie. Please use the viewing guides on this page to watch with an educated eye.

Give specific examples of the following elements of the film as they are revealed in the first 29 minutes of the tape:

characterization

Jim Bruton

Lutie Cameron Bruton

Brice Chamberlain

Jeff

the land

conflict

complication

exposition

foreshadowing

protagonist

setting

first

second

theme

plot so far

The Sea of Grass: A Viewing Guide

Viewing Guide - Day Two

Give specific examples of the following elements of the story as you watch the 46 minutes of film today:

genre

character development

Jim Bruton

Lutie Cameron Bruton

Brice Chamberlain

the land

continuation of plot

tone

Viewing Guide - Day Three

Complete the task at hand for the remainder of the video:

character development

Jim Bruton

Lutie Cameron Bruton

Bruce Chamberlain

the land

climax

falling action

resolution

Vocabulary Terms for Study of the Novel

Character development: The ways in which a novelist shows how a character changes as a result of experiencing a sequence of events over an extensive period of time.

Characterization: The methods a writer uses to communicate information about characters to readers.

Climax: The moment when the action comes to its highest point of dramatic conflict. Most often, the climax occurs before the actual ending of the story.

Complication: Any obstacle that increases the tension of the story conflict.

Conflict: The central source of tension and drama in the story. Conflict is also referred to as the **story problem**.

Exposition: Background material about character, setting, and dramatic situation with which the author introduces the essentials of the story to the reader.

Falling Action: The part of the story, following the climax and leading to the resolution, in which there is a sharp decline in dramatic tension.

Foreshadowing: A writing technique that gives readers clues about events that will happen later in the story.

Genre: Any of a number of traditional forms of the novel that are categorized by a particular treatment of character, plot, setting or style.

Imagery: The use of selected details to describe one thing in terms of another. This comparison helps suggest additional meanings and feelings.

Plot: The arrangement of story events that defines a novel's structure; its skeleton.

Point of view: The perspective from which the story is told.

Protagonist: The central character of the story.

Resolution: The conclusion of the story. The resolution includes the story's action after the climax until the end of the story.

Setting: The environment in which the story takes place.

Style: The characteristic ways that an individual author uses language, including word choice, length and complexity of sentences, patterns of sound, and use of imagery and symbols.

Suspense: Techniques used by the author to keep readers interested in the story and wondering what will happen next.

Symbol: An image, object, character or action that stands for an idea (or ideas) beyond its literal meaning.

Theme: The story's main ideas, the "message" that the author intends to communicate by telling the story. Themes are often universal truths that are suggested by the specifics of the story.

Tone: The clues in a story that suggest the writer's (or narrator's) own attitude toward elements of his or her story.

O Pioneers!—Elements of the Novel

Each of the elements listed below is found in most novels. These are only 20 of the elements that help you as a reader to understand what the author is saying. As you read, locate and list *with page number* examples of each of these items giving a short description of each.

character development:

characterization (both direct and indirect):

climax:

complication:

conflict:

exposition:

falling action:

foreshadowing:

genre:

imagery:

plot:

point of view:

protagonist:

resolution:

setting:

style:

suspense:

symbol:

theme:

tone: