Lesson plan for

“The Time of Plenty” by Judith Slater

Published in spring 2011 Issue



Note to the teacher

Incorporate contemporary fiction into your curriculum with some or all of these components of complete lesson plans, downloadable in customizable Word documents:

* **About the Author** provides context for the story and authors’ perspectives on contemporary literature and the art of writing it

* **Pre-Reading Activities** engage students in relevant whole-class, small-group or individual exercises
* **Post-Reading Discussion Prompts** address the categories of story/theme and craft/writing
* **Post-Reading Writing Prompts** stimulate analytical and creative thinking and writing
* **Further the Discussion** suggests literature with similar subjects or themes, as well as ways for teachers and students to connect with the author

**PLEASE NOTE**: All stories for *Carve* lesson plans are available to read free online (see link at plan’s onset*)*. However, authors hold the rights to their stories; do not photocopy or distribute without their written permission.

Feedback

We’d appreciate if you could take a moment to give us your feedback at <https://www.carvezine.com/lesson-plans-feedback>. Thank you!

“The time of plenty” by judith slater

Story Text & Audio Player

<https://www.carvezine.com/story/2011-spring-slater>

subjectS

Coming of age, the American Dream, American values, changing cultural values, politics

content warning

None

synopsis

“The Time of Plenty” by Judith Slater is both a coming-of-age story and a story about America on the cusp of change. It is 1960 in the town of McClary, Oregon, and, as the world waits for the results of the Kennedy vs. Nixon election, thirteen-year-old Lizzie begins to discover that beneath the pleasures of suburbia lurks secret sadness. The story paints a vivid picture of the affluence and conformity of late 1950s/early 1960s America, and reminds us of the price of prosperity. As such, “The Time of Plenty” can be part of an English / U.S. History cross-curricular approach.

audio version

Approx. 50 minutes

about the author

Direct from the author:

My story collection, *The Baby Can Sing and Other Stories*, won the Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction in 1998 and was published by Sarabande Books in 1999. Stories from that collection were published in *THE GREENSBORO REVIEW*, *BELOIT FICTION JOURNAL*, *BOOK MAGAZINE*, *SONORA REVIEW*, and *BALTIMORE REVIEW*, among others. I have published over 50 short stories in a variety of commercial and literary magazines. I am currently working on two new story collections. The first, THE LIFE OF THE PARTY, includes “The Time of Plenty” and explores that same 1950s-60s time period and cast of characters; three other stories from that collection have been published in ASCENT Magazine. The other collection I’m working on is called THE PSYCHIC FAIR AT THE END OF THE SEASON, and stories from that book have been published in A RIVER AND SOUND REVIEW, LAKE EFFECT, ECLIPSE, PEARL, and LITERAL LATTÉ.

From 1987 to the present I taught fiction writing and literature at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; I have recently retired and moved to Ashland, Oregon.

As for my influences, like Lizzie in “The Time of Plenty,” I grew up as an only child, and spent a lot of time by myself, reading and living in the world of my imagination. I created elaborately complicated personalities and stories for my dolls and stuffed animals. I think this, probably more than anything else, turned me into a writer – I was free to explore the world of my imagination, and I had the time to do it. When I finished all of the Nancy Drew books and there weren’t any more, I wrote one of my own. There was always a link for me between writing and the books I was reading; I would hear a writer’s voice in my head and consciously try to imitate what he or she was doing.

John Cheever is probably my biggest literary influence; he also wrote about the 1950s, and explored some of the same themes as “The Time of Plenty.” Fitzgerald – especially GATSBY – is also a big influence. I get ideas from dreams, art, photographs, and nature as well.

pre-reading activity

Individually

* Define the word *prosperity* and reflect on how important you believe prosperity is for a successful life
* Rank from 1 (not at all important) to 10 (extremely important) how important you feel it is to achieve prosperity in one’s own life

As a group

Form a line that indicates the ranking each of you gives to the importance of prosperity.

* When you have formed a human continuum, take turns explaining your position
* Change positions in line if persuaded by another student’s views

POST-READING discussion prompts

story/theme

1. The story begins, “It was the fall of 1960….” Why is that time period important to the story? What specific details does Slater include to capture this particular time in America? What details does she include that foreshadow the dramatic changes that will occur in America by the end of the decade?
2. Compare and contrast Paul and Helen Brashler with Lizzie’s parents, Matt and Irene. How are the two relationships different despite their similarities?
3. Lizzie describes herself as “the only child, the one who watched and listened.” Through her observations, Lizzie begins to understand complexities in the adult world. What are some of the things she comes to understand?
4. There are many references to power in the story. Locate as many references as you can and analyze them to determine what the story says about power in America.
5. The Brashlers represent people who seem to have achieved a version of the American Dream. What textual evidence suggests that? What does the evidence suggest are the results of that achievement?
6. Many connections have been drawn between the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 and the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Using information from this story, discuss the parallels you see in terms of the two men, their wives, the elections, and cultural conditions.

POST-READING discussion prompts, cont’d

craft/writing

1. A foil is a character or characters with opposite qualities of another character, as in the Brashlers and Lizzie's parents. Similarly, Paul Brashler and Andy Zirkle are foils. How does the use of foils contribute to characterization in the story?
2. Slater uses a variety of symbols throughout the story. While each is important to the story on a literal level, each also stands for something beyond itself. Discuss the following symbols: a) Kennedy vs. Nixon – (note to the teacher: If possible, have students view a video clip from the Kennedy/Nixon debates to see the sharp differences between the candidates. Compare this visual experience to the description in Slater’s story); the three cherries in the drink Paul Brashler makes for Lizzie; the destruction of the weedy field; the Star Book; the name *Brashler*; Bunny the cat; and Helen Brashler’s missing shoes.
3. “The Time of Plenty” is told from the first person point of view. This makes Lizzie something of an unreliable narrator, a situation compounded by the fact that she is only thirteen and therefore not completely cognizant of or comfortable with all the adult issues she encounters. Discuss how some of her perceptions reflect her childlike view of the world while others show her growing understanding of the adult world. What do you as a reader understand about the characters and their lives that Lizzie may not?

POST-READING writing prompts

analytical writing

1. In “The Time of Plenty” Helen Brashler says, “Paul keeps talking about prosperity, but we already have that, and it’s empty.” Write an essay using evidence from the text to interpret what she means.

You can use a version of this graphic organizer to develop your analysis:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Examples of prosperity in the text** | **How they illustrate emptiness** |
| 1. |  |
| Etc.  |  |

1. Go back to your original free-write in which you reflected on what prosperity means and how important it is to you. Consider whether any of your ideas have changed after reading “The Time of Plenty.” Then write an essay in which you either agree or disagree with Helen Brashler’s comments about prosperity and emptiness. Be sure to use specific examples from your own or others’ lives to defend your point of view.
2. Write an essay in which you explore the concept of the American Dream. Possible ideas to address include:
* What components does the American Dream typically include? How has the American Dream changed from the late 1950’s/early 1960’s to today? Why?
* How does the American Dream differ from the aspirations of other cultures or countries?
* Does the idea of the American Dream have meaning to you personally?

POST-READING writing prompts, cont’d

Creative Writing

1. At the end of the story, Helen Brashler says to Lizzie’s mother: “But I have so much more to tell you…I have so much more to say.” Imagine she *does* continue the conversation. What do you think she would say to Irene? Write that monologue.
2. Using the first person point of view, write a narrative in which you describe a time when as a child you were witness to the adult world and had an epiphany, or a sudden realization about that world.
3. Working with another student, create the Channel 2 Mel Lyons interview with the victorious Brashlers. Write the questions Lyons might ask and the answers Paul and Helen might give. Present this as a written transcript of the interview or create an audiotape or a video of the interview.

further the discussion

Literary Connections

Read John Steinbeck’s “Paradox and Dream,” a 1966 essay on the American Dream. Discuss what Steinbeck says about Americans and their pursuit of the American Dream, and compare and contrast his views with the words and actions of the characters in “A Tine of Plenty.”

Works that explore the pursuit of the American Dream:

* *The Great Gatsby*– F. Scott Fitzgerald
* *A Death of a Salesman*– Arthur Miller
* *Fences* – August Wilson
* “The Enormous Radio” – John Cheever

Works that explore coming of age:

* *The Catcher in the Rye* – J.D. Salinger
* *To Kill a Mockingbird*– Harper Lee
* *The Secret Life of Bees* – Sue Monk Kidd
* *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* – Stephen Chbosky
* “American Beauty” – Ethan Canin
* “White Angel” – Michael Cunningham

Connect with the author

The teacher may contact this author to further the discussion. Students are also encouraged to leave comments on the story’s page online. Comments are subject to moderation.

Email: jcslater@unlnotes.unl.edu

* Yes, author is available for Skype or phone sessions.
* Yes, students may contact directly by email with comments and questions.
* Yes, teachers may contact by email on behalf of students with comments and questions.
* Yes, teachers may snail mail letters on behalf of students. (Please contact author for mailing address.)