CONCEPT ANALYSIS: BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA

Publisher: Harper Collins
Edition:
Year: 1978

BRIEF PLOT SUMMARY:

Jesse Oliver Aarons Jr. Is a kid who just wants to fit in. He wants to be the fastest runner in the fifth grade, he wants his little sisters to leave him alone, and he wants to make his dad proud of him. When Leslie Burke suddenly moves next door, she shows him that he can be whoever he wants to be—even a king, and the two become inseparable. Through his friendship with Leslie, Jess learns that not only can he stand up for himself, but the world has no limits. Leslie has given him a piece of himself that can never be forgotten, even when tragedy occurs. The book is divided up by thirteen chapters, each dealing with Jess’s evolving friendship with Leslie. As the book progresses, their magic world develops as do their imaginations, allowing Jess to cope with the problems in his real life. This unit has been prepared for a 7th grade class.

THE BIG QUESTION:

Bridge to Terabithia is a complex novel that involves countless issues that are relevant to our students’ lives. Perhaps the most prevalent issue that surrounds the novel is how to overcome a terrible tragedy, or how to deal with loss. This, however, is not what we want our students to focus on. With that said, there are other issues such as peer acceptance, adult relationships, individuality, and friendship. We want our students to come away with a knowledge that “it takes courage to grow up and become who we really are” as stated by E.E. Cummings. Therefore, our essential question is “What qualities can help you grow up and become who you really are?”
BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE: Katherine Paterson grew up in China where her parents instilled in her a strong Christian faith. Her parents were Christian missionaries and Katherine learned early on how to speak openly about Christianity. During World War II her family moved to Winchester, Virginia. This is when she learned English, and became a reader and a writer. After College she was a 6th Grade English Teacher for a year in Lovettsville, VA. She has four children, one, to whom the book is dedicated, who had a friend growing up much like Leslie and for whom Bridge to Terabithia is also a dedication.

ISSUES RELATED TO THE STUDY OF LITERATURE:

Themes: Some major themes woven throughout the novel are the answer to our essential question: What qualities help you to grow up and become who you really are? Friendship has a great effect on both Jess and Leslie. Through friendship they are able to overcome the adversities that befall them. The other relationships that Jess has with his peers, parents, siblings, and teachers, is also a major theme of the book. This particular unit will focus on the themes of overcoming loss, seeing people as they really are, and taking responsibility.

Setting: The story takes place in the rural south in the town of Lark Creek in the later years of the 1970's. Although the state and exact time period are never stated it is believed that because Katherine Paterson wrote the novel in the year 1977 that the novel takes place within that year. The author also lived in Virginia which makes many readers believe she wrote the story in the same setting. The novel however does not specify the exact place or time and because of this transcends both and touches current readers. With it’s undoubtedly southern setting the authenticity of language and the small town nature of the town allow for the themes of friendship, connection, and loss to permeate the novel.

Narrative Voice: The fact that the story is told through the eyes of Jess is crucial. It allows us as readers to truly “step into his shoes,” so to speak, feel as if we are him. “Ba-room, ba-room, barippity, barippity--Good. His dad had the pickup going. He could get up now” (1). We can feel as if we are Jess hearing those noises as he wakes up. It is important for
our students to understand the use of a third-person narrator and how we don’t know what’s going on with the other characters until Jess is with them. Although the story is about both Jess and Leslie, the fact that the narrator chooses to only show Jess’s perspective is telling of how important Jess’s character is. Everything in the story happens to him. This allows us to understand how Jess develops into the person that he truly is, “everything seemed possible” (61).

**Characterization:** Paterson does remarkably well with making her characters deeply human. By showing flaws and bias’, desires and competitive drives, she allows the reader to connect with her characters.

**Jesse Aarons:** A fifth grader who wants deeply to impress his school friends but mostly gain the acceptance of his father. His competitive nature comes out in running and is disappointed when Leslie Burke, a girl beats him at a running match.(34) He is one half of the team of two main characters in the novel, a king in Terabithia, and Leslie Burke’s best friend.

**Leslie Burke:** The new girl in school she moves in and is an immediate outcast in her school and neighborhood. Her forward thinking and forthright attitude make her stand out in the small Virginian town. When she becomes friends with Jesse Aarons they find and become rulers of Terabithia, a magical kingdom for the both of them.

**MayBelle Aarons:** Jesse’s little sister. Second youngest in the Aarons family she is a smart little girl who wants to be a part of Leslie and Jess’s friendship. She looks up to her older brother, respects him and wants him to be happy.

**Miss Edmunds:** Jess and Leslie’s Middle School Music teacher. She is a free-flowing hippie who let’s Jess Aaron and Leslie Burke be themselves and accept them for who they are. Jess has a huge crush on Miss Edmunds.

**Janice Avery:** Janice Avery is the school bully. She bullies Maybelle, Jess’s little sister. When Leslie and Jess find out a secret about Janice they find out she may not be as tough as she seems.

**Mr. Burke:** Leslie’s Father, He is constantly having intellectual conversations with Jess and Leslie and is very supportive of helping them look at things in new ways.

**Mrs. Burke:** Leslie’s Mom, She’s a writer working on a story throughout the novel. Although we never hear about her stories we know she’s a fiction writer as she gets inspiration from the
experiences of Jess and Leslie

**Mr. Aarons:** Jess’s Father. Jess looks up to his dad with the utmost respect. Away a lot at work, Mr. Aarons expects Jesse to be able to support the family. He spends time with his daughters and sets high expectations for his only son.

**Mrs. Aarons:** Jess’s Mom. She struggles to keep the family afloat. Skeptical of Jesse’s friendship with Leslie she judges the Burke Family at first. This judgement is later reversed at the end of the novel.

**Ellie Aarons:** Ellie Aarons is one of Jesse’s older sisters, attached at the hip to Brenda Aarons her sister around the same age, the girls are shown as the typical teenager who wants to be a normal consumer in a struggling family situation.

**Brenda Aarons:** Brenda Aarons is another older sister of Jess Aarons. She also is glued at the hip to her sister Ellie and the two often complain and try to get things out of their parents as well as stand in opposition to Jess, who is supposed to be the responsible man of the house.

**Joyce Ann Aarons:** The baby of the Aarons family. She is often seen or heard in the background. She complicates the lives of the Aarons and is seen as an annoyance to her older siblings, especially Jesse.

**Other Literary Terms:** The novel is full of similies. This would be a great text to teach a mini lesson on. The similes in the text are often used to relate an unknown term or colloquial term to a more common image so the reader can connect the culture of the town with the meaning the character is trying to get across.

**Affective Issues Related to the Work:** There are many issues embedded within the text that will allow our students to apply the novel to their own lives. Among these are are abuse, how to overcome loss, friendship, peer acceptance, individuality, adult and child relationships, and even hippie life. Perhaps one of the most pertinent issues within the work is individuality; it encompasses all of the issues into one word, which goes back to our central question: What qualities can help you grow up and become who you really are? We plan on helping our students understand that these issues in the book can teach them how to apply certain characteristics to their own lives. For example, Janice Avery is a character that gets beaten by her dad, and we could lead a class discussion on abuse. We could also discuss things such as friendship and
peer acceptance. Leslie helps Jess understand that he can stand up to bigger kids than him, and he doesn’t have to conform to the ideas surrounding him. With Leslie, Jess can finally be himself. Finally, one of the most crucial aspects of the novel is how to deal with loss, being able to find the strength and courage necessary to learn and grow from it. Loss comes in many forms, not just death, and our students will hopefully be able to use this novel as a means of coping with a recent loss or a future loss.

**Vocabulary Issues:**

Knowing both the vernacular and vocabulary of the text will no doubt help our students delve deeper into the text, allowing them to truly flesh out the meaning of it. Vocabulary should be taught both before reading and after reading as a means for frontloading our students, preparing them to fully understand the meanings of the novel or chapter as a whole, not just one word. First of all, it is important that our students obtain a background knowledge of farm life. There are words that students may not understand unless they have worked on a farm themselves. Along with farm life words there are curse words such as “damn” and “hell” and “Lord,” but we need to help our students understand that they are not used in the context of swearing, rather they are using the literal meaning of the words. There are also words within the text that students will need to understand that pertain to the themes and issues of the novel. Finally, there are vocabulary words that are just simply difficult that our students will need help with understanding. Some examples of vocabulary words that students should know for this unit are as follows:

- Hypocritical (20)
- Vigorously (60)
- Obliged (122)
- Pandemoium (19)
- Peculiar (12)
- Consolation (43)
- Liable (51)
- Perceive (136)
- Hippie (18)
- Conspicuous (35)
- Nuisance (102)
- Sacred (149)
- Endure (18)
- Hostile (105)
- Kinship (151)
- Complacent (119)
- Anticipation (19)
- Conceited (39)
- Alcove (109)
- Sincere (186)

**Implications for Students of Diversity:** There are many cases of diversity in the text. The biggest being the difference between the two households of the Aarons as they try to understand each others way of life. This is shown in the scrimping and saving and tight wallet of the Aarons home and the remodeling and finer things in the Burke’ home.
Many different types of families are shown in the text as the Burkes have an almost friendship with each other with more of a hands off parenting approach, the Aarons have a parent child relationship with high expectations for their children and Janice Avery comes from an abusive family situation. The novel allows for students from diverse backgrounds to understand a perspective of someone who might not have grown up the same way as them.

**Gender Issues:**

The gender issues within this novel are huge. But students will not be able to really access these specific issues without a background on what life was like in the 70s, when the story takes place. For that reason, we think it would be wise to lead a discussion on that particular decade and talk about what we know about hippies, about gender roles, and life in general back then.

There seems to be a stereotype of how women were supposed to look and act back then. For example, when Jess is describing Miss Edmonds he mentions that his mom considers her a “hippie” because she wears cut off jeans and no lipstick (19). Leslie serves as a very similar character to Miss Edmunds because she too wears pants and her hair is cut short (26), and often times Jess’s sisters make fun of her for being more of a boy than a girl (??). Leslie is also expected to play “hopscotch” (40) with the other girls, instead of run races with the boys. But Leslie defies this stereotype and becomes the fastest runner in the fifth grade (42). Even the teacher, who loves Leslie, acknowledges that she is unusual for a girl when she reads Leslie’s paper aloud about scuba diving, “An unusual hobby--for a girl” (49).

There is also a stereotype for men in the book as well. For example, Jess is expected to develop talents other than drawing. His dad considers it a waste of time (16) because he needs to provide for a family some day. Furthermore, Jess wishes that he could have the same relationship with his dad that his sisters have with their dad, but Jess is afraid to show emotion in front of his dad--he is too grown up for that (22). Jess is also a topic of worry for his parents, that he always hangs out with girls (69).

**Project Ideas:**

There are three particular project ideas that are creative and would go well with this particular text. One of which employs the use of the iPad--if you have access to a class set. There is an app called “PictureBook” that allows the user to use pictures that they have either uploaded themselves or
downloaded from the internet. Using those pictures they create a picture book that either gives a brief summary of the novel, an alternate ending, or a side story about a character. Another project idea is to do something called a “Living Commercial” where the students work together in a group to create a commercial (of sorts) that sells the book to a particular audience. The students will have to highlight important parts of the novel and they will have to use their best judgement as to what to highlight from the text. The third project idea is, perhaps, would be the most telling of what students have learned from the text and the unit as a whole. It is creating a newspaper, and ideally it would be a group project. Throughout the unit it would be important to show students examples and help them understand the genres of the types of articles that go into a newspaper. They could be required to write three different articles: One overarching article that consists of the title page (perhaps covering Leslie’s death) and then the students could choose which other two types of articles they would like to write. It could consist of a sports article (running), a gossip column, dear abby, classified ads, or a book/movie review of *Bridge to Terabithia*.

**Text sets and enrichment resources:**

*Bridge to Terabithia* has so many issues and themes enveloped in the text that it can be fairly easy to find text sets and enrichment sources that went well with the novel. One major part of the book is Terabithia itself—the secret world that the Jess and Leslie build together. In the novel Leslie teaches Jess about the magical land of Narnia as means to show him how a magic kingdom should be ruled (59). It would be a great idea to implement *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by simply reading short excerpts and watching short clips—just so students can get a feel for how a magic world works and how there are so many different kinds, they simply have to use their imagination. There are also picture books that show various magical worlds such as “Nothing to Do” by Douglas Wood. After students have received a background knowledge of how magic kingdoms or secret worlds, have them write about their own magic world from when they were younger, or make one up. Finally, as you read the novel, it would be very beneficial for students to be able to see clips from the movie, *Bridge to Terabithia*, because the movie focuses more on the visual aspects of the magical world of Terabithia more than the book does.

Another major issue of the text is how to deal with loss. We thought it would be good to read an expository text/informational text together as a class about the grieving process. A psychologist named Julie Axelrod wrote
an article entitled “The 5 Stages of Loss and Grief” that will help students understand what many people go through when they experience loss. The article is also easy to understand and read, allowing the students to focus more on the content than on the difficult vernacular of an expository text. To give further insight into why Katherine Paterson decided to end the book the way she did and how she showed Jess dealing with the loss, use the following clip. http://www.teachingbooks.net/book_reading.cgi?id=749&a=1 This clip is the author speaking about what motivated her to write the book and end it the way she did, she also reads aloud a significant part of the novel when Jess finds out that Leslie has died.

Finally, a great way to build students’ schema on the 70’s is the music video for “On Top of The World” by Imagine Dragons, which is a humorous video that portrays America in 1969 during the first landing on the moon. This video could foster discussion about 70’s culture, dress, and controversy. teachers could also encourage students to find their own information on the 70’s as an era and bring their own text sets into class.