**Socratic Seminar**

**Purpose of the Strategy:** To help students discuss the main theme of the novel, “What does it mean to live and die” and to come to some of their own conclusions about it to apply the novel to real life. The novel is fairly long, but this theme is fairly common and so by the end of reading the novel, students should be prepared to discuss this, provided you give them a little help.

**Context:** The Socratic Seminar can be used to wrap up the novel because it takes themes from the beginning of the novel that persist to the end, specifically living and dying.

**Objective:** Engage students with the text and apply the themes to their own lives, help students to be confident to have a good group discussion, help students consider life and death.

**Materials:** A copy of the Socratic Seminar Rules (Gossard) and Outer Circle Notes (Metzger) for each student, copies of the “Life and Death Quotes,”

**Time:** 20 minutes the first day, 50 minutes the second day

**Directions:**

1. **Day 1:** Read aloud what Great-Grandma says to Douglas about dying, pp. 182-183. After reading, go back to where she says, "No one's ever died that had a family" (183). Ask the students what she means by that. Is she right? Tell them that there are no right answers or wrong answers. Say, “What do you think?” Can a person really live on in their family? How does a person live on in their family? (the family carries her genes, they act like she does, they uphold the same values, they like the same things) Does she only live on conditionally, like if the family remembers her or upholds family values and traditions, etc.?
   
   a. Now hand out the Quotes on Life and Death sheet and ask students to read through each of the quotes with a partner and write down if they agree or disagree with the views of life and death.
   
   b. Now tell students that for homework they will write a handwritten one page paper on their views of life and death. Tell them that this will be graded on content *and not on mechanics, organization, etc.* Write on the board, “Using the quotes from the sheet or others you find in the text or from other sources (if you want), talk about why you agree with these quotes, or why you disagree, giving solid reasons.”
   
   c. Stress that you will be having a class discussion on this topic tomorrow that they will be in charge of. Hand out the Socratic Seminar rules, so that they are prepared for the class discussion. Have a student read aloud the rules and ask for any questions about what is going on. Tell students that everyone will need to make a comment the next day, and that *they* will be running the discussion. Ask, “Who is running the discussion?” Make sure they can respond.

2. **Day 2:** The students should come to class with their papers and new ideas on life and death.
   
   a. **Socratic Seminar:** Have the students arrange all the desks but eight in a big circle. Leave the eight outside of the circle. Ask for volunteers to be in the eight chairs. Give those in
the eight chairs the Outer Circle Notes handouts. Have everyone else sit in the circle. Make sure everyone has their papers out, ready to refer to in the discussion.

b. Ask what the teacher’s role in the discussion is. See if they remember that the teacher is not running the discussion, but the students themselves. Tell students that once the discussion begins, you will only talk to switch students from the outer circle to the inner circle. Tell students that they are in a discussion, and they will lead the discussion where they choose, so long as they stay on the topic of life and death. Go over the Socratic Seminar Rules sheet. Pass out more if they’ve forgotten them.

c. Tell students that everyone is expected to speak—You are recording who speaks. Ask for a volunteer to start the conversation.

d. Now explain the outer circle, and hand out the Outer Circle Notes to everyone in the big circle. Say that when you get a chance to be in the outer circle, you need to listen and observe the discussion, taking notes on the handout.

e. Explain that you will say “Switch!” every 8 minutes. When that happens, the inner circle freezes and everyone who has not gotten a chance to be in the outer circle raises their hands. People from the inner circle choose people from the outer circle to switch with.

f. Now go over the rules again, asking the students: What happens when no one is talking? (Someone needs to start talking, trying to pick up the conversation where it left off) What happens when I say “Switch!”? etc. to check for understanding.

g. Tell students that you will stop them in 45 minutes, but it’s time for the Socratic Seminar!

3. **Tie-in:** As you listen to the discussion, take some notes of who speaks and main points given (It’s easiest to just use a grade column and check off each student as they speak). Now when they’re done, tell them they did a good job and go over a few points that you liked a lot from what they said—possibly take two sides of a debate. Now relate it to Douglas realizing that he too must die and the horror that gives him until he comes to terms with it. Tell students that there may be a question on their test about life or death, but it’s a question that uses both opinion and textual evidence, so it won’t be hard.

**Assessment:** Collect the papers and grade for completeness and content. Remember, they will probably develop their ideas further in the discussion than they did in their papers. Also, give a participation grade if they participated. Lastly, this would be a good test question for a short essay.
Socratic Seminar Rules
25) Don’t raise hand (it’s a conversation)
26) Talk to each other
27) Help each other out
28) Take a risk—be willing to think out loud; explore a new idea with the group
29) Be willing to stick with another person’s idea until it becomes clear. Ask follow-up questions, locate a supporting passage from the text, offer an example, and so on
30) Refer to the text
31) Speak loudly enough that everyone can hear
32) Be respectful of members of the group

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Colonel Freeleigh’s dream about dying:
“And then there is that day when all around, all around you hear the dropping of the apples, one by one, from the trees. At first it is one here and one there, and then it is three and then it is four and nine and twenty, until the apples plummet like rain, fall like horse hoofs in the soft, darkening grass, and you are the last apple on the tree; and you wait for the wind to work you slowly free from your hold upon the sky, and drop you down and down. Long before you hit the grass you will have forgotten there ever was a tree, or other apples, or a summer, or green grass below. You will fall in darkness…” (p. 129)

Colonel Freeleigh tries to explain to his nurse why it is better for him to be excited than it is for him to be shut away and bored. He explains that he enjoyed talking to the young boys, despite his frail health, saying, "It was worth it. I don't care. I was in a pure fever and I was alive." (p. 131)

Douglas declares that when Colonel Freeleigh died, so did "all those soldiers and general Lees and Grant and Honest Abe..." (p. 138)

"All the things ever seen, they didn't just die, that couldn't be. They must be out there somewhere, searching the world." (p. 139)

Look at the first long paragraph on page 143 about Helen once being a swan, but is now a dragon. Her young self will never exist again. Is this a kind of death, even though she is still alive?