

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for It's Such a Beautiful Day by Isaac Asimov

Book Information

Isaac Asimov, It's Such a Beautiful Day

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Book Level: 5.3

Interest Level: UG

A boy named Richard lives in a future world where robots serve every need. One day Richard suddenly encounters the beautiful, natural world without robots.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Science Fiction, Future; Science Fiction, Robots; Series, Creative Short Stories; Short Stories, Short Stories (All)

Main Characters

Dr. Hamilton Sloane a psychologist who analyzes Richard's behavior; he understands Richard's liking for the outdoors

Joe Bloom the repairman who fixes Mrs. Hanshaw's Door

Miss Elizabeth Robbins Richard's schoolteacher, who reports Richard's unusual behavior to Mrs. Hanshaw

Mrs. Hanshaw Richard's proud mother, who is bothered by Richard's attraction to the outdoors

Richard Hanshaw, Jr. a twelve-year-old boy who dislikes using Doors and enjoys exploring the outdoors

Vocabulary

conspicuous obvious; remarkable and unusual

estheticism a sensitivity to art and beauty

hovel a poor cottage or house

neurosis a mental disorder characterized by anxious behavior or irrational fears

petulantly in an impatient, forward, or quarrelsome manner

Synopsis

The year is 2117, and Mrs. Hanshaw's home is full of technological conveniences. Her most prized possession is her new Door, a device that allows her to instantly travel. This is the most widely used form of transportation in District A-3, and it removes the need for people to ever go outside of their sterilized homes or public buildings.

One morning, Mrs. Hanshaw tries to send her son Richard off to school, but the Door does not work. Mrs. Hanshaw is angered, and she sends her son through the emergency door into the outdoors with instructions to walk straight to the neighbors' home and use their Door to get to school.

Mrs. Hanshaw immediately has the Door repaired. Later that morning she receives a call from Richard's teacher, Miss Robbins, who informs her that Richard was over an hour late from school and was covered with mud. Miss Robbins has also noticed that Richard's attitude seems to have changed, and she is worried about his mental health. She recommends that he undergo a psychic probe, which greatly offends Mrs. Hanshaw. Mrs. Hanshaw is worried about her reputation, and she dismisses Miss Robbins's advice.

Although Mrs. Hanshaw pretends to be unconcerned, she is worried about Richard. Her worries are compounded when she learns that he walked home from school instead of using the school's Door. Richard says that he simply does not like to use the Door any longer, and Mrs. Hanshaw hopes that Richard is only going through a temporary phase.

For several days Mrs. Hanshaw keeps a close watch over Richard. She observes that some days he uses the Door, but most of the time he uses the door to the outside. One day Richard is caught in the rain while walking home, and he ends up with a cold. This convinces Mrs. Hanshaw that Richard needs psychiatric help, and she makes an appointment with Dr. Sloane. Dr. Sloane believes that Richard probably developed a neurosis towards using Doors when he realized the machines could fail. Instead of recommending a psychic probe, which uses a

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machine to trace the mental circuits in the brain, the doctor recommends simply talking with the boy.

Mrs. Hanshaw is skeptical that talking with Richard will yield any results, but she nonetheless arranges for Dr. Sloane to meet with Richard. Richard is unresponsive and bored during the interview until Dr. Sloane suggests they take a walk outdoors. Once outside, Dr. Sloane is overwhelmed with what he sees. He had not been outside since college, and Richard reintroduces him to the beautiful sights, sounds, and natural sensations that he had forgotten. He deduces that Richard is a normal child who discovered the beauty of the natural world when he was forced to walk to his neighbors' house. Dr. Sloane concludes his visit by deciding to walk home, since it really is a beautiful day.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

What purpose do the mekkanos have in the story?

Mekkanos are all-purpose servants in District A-3. At the beginning of the story, a mekkano performs every duty necessary for getting Richard ready for school, and Mrs. Hanshaw's only obligation is to give Richard a kiss on the cheek before he leaves. They are efficient workers both indoors and outdoors. For example, when Richard shows Dr. Sloane the outside, he comments on the number of mekkanos he sees mowing the lawn, tending the flowers, and doing other work to keep the outdoors beautiful. And because the mekkanos do most of the housework, Mrs. Hanshaw has time available for traveling and other leisure activities.

Literary Analysis

One important theme suggested in this story is people's overdependence on technology to solve all of their problems. What examples from the story illustrate this theme? How does this theme relate to your life?

Dr. Sloane makes several observations about over-reliance on machines. He notices that people are quick to request a psychological probe when all a person may need is somebody to talk to or somebody to listen. He realizes that his society has become so dependent on machines that it is considered abnormal to want to walk outside to a destination. Miss Robbins also comments on the role machines play in her classroom. She questions whether it is a good idea to use the vocalizer, a machine that dictates perfect speech to the students, to train students to speak with a mass-average accent and intonation. Possibly the most glaring examples, though, come from Richard and Mrs. Hanshaw. When the Door breaks, Richard does not even know how to get out of his house. Mrs. Hanshaw tells him how to use a door, but she is adamant about letting people know that she will only do something manually if it is a dire emergency. Students may notice similar behavior in their own lives. For instance, they may spend more time watching television than playing outside. They may drive short distances when they can easily walk. They might also play sports indoors, as Dr. Sloane does, which could be played outdoors (basketball, tennis, indoor golf, etc.)

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Inferential Comprehension

What do you think may have caused the characters in this story to stop spending time outdoors? Do you think this could ever happen in real life?

The most likely explanation for this society's indoor culture stems from the inventions of the Door and the mekkanos. Doors enable people to travel from one building to another without ever having to step outside. Because Doors and the power to run them are expensive, Doors became a status symbols for the prosperous. Never having to face the natural elements became an object of pride for the people of District A-3. The mekkanos, or robotic servants, were programmed to do most of the outdoor work and do it so efficiently that some people even forgot they were there. Over time, the outdoors probably became synonymous with dirt, germs, and poverty, while staying indoors was thought of as clean, healthy, and decent. Some students may think such a change is logical and consistent with human nature, while others may argue that it is unrealistic.

Constructing Meaning

If somebody were to invent the Door today, how popular do you think it would be? Would you use it to travel, or would you be afraid of the dangers? How do you think such an invention would change your life?

Students' answers will vary. The Door would undoubtedly be a popular commodity in our society, but some students would not wish to use the Door because of how it works. The story explains that when people travel through a Door, their atoms are disassembled and, for a short time, they are no longer alive. Other students would be excited about using Doors. The story shows that Door-related accidents or casualties are scarce (Dr. Sloane had never heard of any), and students may say there is danger in every form of transportation. If such an invention were used today, people would be able to travel the world quickly and cheaply. The poor societies of the world, however, would probably be unaffected by the convenience.

Recognizing Setting Have the students build a model of what they think District A-3 looks like as Richard sees it. They can work in small groups or as a class and build model houses, public Doors, businesses, trees, gardens, the creek, the school, mekkanos, and any other feature of the setting. They should build the model from an outdoor perspective: Are the houses well maintained? What does the surrounding landscape look like? Are there ancient roads, sidewalks, or other remains of an outdoor culture? Materials used to build the model can vary depending on the amount of time devoted to the activity.

Extending Meaning The narrator of this story claims that Richard's neurosis "was not the type of thing you would find listed as a neurosis in the usual textbooks...." Ask the students to use psychology textbooks, the library, or the Internet to research neurotic conditions. Then ask them to write an essay stating whether or not they think Richard's behavior was neurotic. They should develop their essay with a scientific explanation of their opinion.

Understanding Literary Features Isaac Asimov provides the reader with scientific descriptions of his fictional machines. For example, he says that the Door malfunctioned because the "brake-valve" was "depolarized." He also gives a rational explanation for the theory behind the psychological probe. Have the students focus on Asimov's ability to incorporate scientific theory into his fiction, and then have them make up their own futuristic invention and describe it using the conventions of science fiction. Their invention may be as imaginative as they wish, but it should have a foundation of some recognizable scientific principles.

Identifying Persuasive Language Create a scenario for the students in which Mrs. Hanshaw is suing Dr. Sloane for malpractice because Richard never recovered from his love for the outdoors or his dislike for Doors. You can then split the students into legal teams, one for defense and one for prosecution, and have them prepare an argument for their appropriate side. In order to do this, they will have to focus on what

Teachable Skills

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Dr. Sloane told Mrs. Hanshaw, how he attempted to treat Richard, and the miscellaneous factors of the society they live in. Once their arguments are prepared, have the teams hold a mock trial for Dr. Sloane and mediate a debate between the two sides.