

The Black Pits of Luna Lesson Plans

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Introduction:

“The Black Pits of Luna” was one of the breakout stories Robert Heinlein wrote after WWII, as he broke out of the pulp magazine ghetto he had quickly come to dominate before the war, and into the mainstream readership, in the pages of *The Saturday Evening Post*. Never before in science fiction had any writer gone from the pulps to the slicks; Robert Heinlein was a trailblazer in this, as in so many other ways.

The first one in *The Saturday Evening Post* was “The Green Hills of Earth” on February 8, 1947. Within the science fiction community, reaction ranged from the astonished stares and hopes of fellow writers, to a bitter sense of betrayal on the part of a few readers (Forry Ackerman said the slick stories made him “sick”, because he saw them as a dumbing down of science fiction; whenever Heinlein expanded his repertoire, not a few of his long-time readers had a negative reaction because they wanted more of the same, which Heinlein never did).

After Hiroshima, the general public wanted to understand what it all meant, and science fiction tried to provide an answer. As part of the awakening to the impact on the world of the advanced technology WWII had brought, and the Cold War would accelerate, science fiction moved into the mainstream in periodic cycles – most of them spurred by Heinlein: the slick stories, the juveniles, the science articles, the predictions, and the most immediately influential, *Destination Moon*, the first American film to seriously portray a flight to the moon, written by Heinlein himself. This story is best seen as a part of that breakout, as well as a literary gem.

We hope you find the following lesson plans helpful, and that you will choose *Black Pits of Luna* or another Heinlein work to use in your classrooms. We would like to hear from you about your own experiences using Heinlein’s works. Please email us!

Edition Used:

I have used the version of the story included on this Educators CD, as the most convenient place to find the story.

Date of Publication:

“The Black Pits of Luna” was written in April, 1947, and published in January 1948 in *The Saturday Evening Post*, one of the prestigious “slick” magazine.

Summary / Discussion Notes:

The story will be summarized, and pertinent details and issues explicated. Any of the details might be turned into extra credit questions, which require the student to do research on the internet or in a library. Heinlein often inserted historical, scientific, and literary references into his novels, as a way of gently urging the reader to explore these

references. Vocabulary words which students may have difficulty with will be suggested, with particular attention paid to words Heinlein invented (which, unless we've adopted the word, won't be found in a dictionary).

I strongly urge that students learn vocabulary not by checking the dictionary, but by the following procedure: 1) say the word aloud (this begins to fix the word in long-term memory); 2) look for roots (Spanish speakers often have an advantage here, since the longer Latinate words in English often have a simple Spanish root, as in the word "facilitate"); 3) use context to make TWO guesses as to what the word means; 4) then, and only then, check the dictionary. Students need to be reminded to learn new vocabulary words, because they will often choose to simply skip the word they don't know, or in running to the dictionary, will fail to permanently learn the new word as they only place the definition into short-term memory. I require my students to learn at least seven new words a week; in this, Heinlein is very helpful, because he actually used a more sophisticated vocabulary in his juveniles than in his adult fiction. If teachers do not encourage students to acquire the new vocabulary, students often have a hard time with Heinlein's juveniles for precisely that reason: they are more difficult than today's more controlled, simplistic vocabulary in most young adult novels.

SUMMARY:

The opening is a masterly display of the kind of immediate immersion into a very different world than the one the reader lives in, as well as a way of bringing the reader to a sense of what the character wants and why. The opening sentence – "The morning after we got to the moon we went over to Rutherford" – displays an astonishing assumption: the Moon has been reached, and is now regularly visited, with an established colony. Heinlein then leaps into another set of details to bring the shock home: they can walk on the surface of the moon, and other than the sense of lighter weight, Luna City's corridors are the same as New York – because New York has gone underground too (why? Population explosion, nuclear safety, who knows? It's just one of those intriguing details Heinlein tosses in to make us feel that essential quality of science fiction, a sense of wonder).

One fun allusion: the Harriman Trust is a reference to "Requiem", the tale of D.D. Harriman, the man who sold the moon (a later tale).

The narrator, the older brother, is playing with his kid brother, because his mother is "dropsick" from the flight from Earth. A note on continuity with children in the 1940s is the fact that they are playing "mumblety-peg", which is played with pocketknives thrown at one's own feet: whoever gets it the closest, wins (what confuses me is what kind of floors do they have on the moon, since it is usually played in the dirt). What message is Heinlein sending here? That a game children have played for generations will continue to be played? That a mother is so irresponsible, she puts one child in charge of another, and thus, they play an outdoor game indoors, damaging the floors? That knives are acceptable toys for children to play with? This has provided a very interesting conversation in more than one class with this story for me as a teacher. Most of the kids don't know what mumblety-peg is, because the game has faded from childhood due to safety concerns.

The “runt” kept missing with the lights, dialing them from low to high. Mumblety-peg is more interesting on the moon, because of the low gravity. The father comes in, and says that they have to leave for Rutherford. The mother, who is seemingly unaware of the nature of her youngest child, calls him “Baby Darling” and tries to exclude him from going, saying they will stay and go see a movie. The runt is a genius at getting his parents to arguing, and they all end up going together.

They are going to Rutherford, on the back side of the moon, where they keep the nuclear power plants. They take a pressurized car into Rutherford. The father goes off to his business meeting, and the mother and two boys go on the tour of the power plants. The narrator (named after his father Richard, but called Dickie) is bored, but he likes the tour guide, Mr. Perrin, who turns out to be a scoutmaster. His father and Mr. Latham (his business contact) return in time to go on the tour outside to see the “Devil’s Graveyard and the site of the Great Disaster of 1984.” The mother doesn’t really want to go (this is exactly the kind of nervous, frightened mother for whom the tranquilizer pill will become an addiction in the fifties; Heinlein’s mothers aren’t usually these nervous nannies, but this one is): “Mother always objects and then gives in.” While one could make an argument that Heinlein is being sexist here – an argument that can be easily refuted from both biographical evidence and other works of fiction – it is more likely a reflection of the child narrator and the limited perspective therein. The mother had to be talked into wearing a moonsuit at dinner the night before, because it was so revealing; one compliment from the father, and she went. They have to sign releases, and then they all get suited up.

They discuss leaving the runt behind in the coffee shop, and Dickie wonders, “Why do adults talk in front of kids as if they couldn’t understand English?” (This is still a good question). Mr. Perrin says they don’t have a spacesuit to fit the runt. When the father tries to suggest that Dickie won’t go either, his business associate wryly points out that the father had insisted that if a man’s word wasn’t kept, then a written contract wouldn’t be any good either. The father is trapped.

Dickie points out that there is a suit small enough, and Mr. Perrin says they can’t use it, as it is private property. Mr. Latham insists. The Director is called in, and while Mr. Perrin doesn’t like it one bit, he eventually consents. They are told the rules, particularly about staying together, and they are outside! Heinlein (through his narrator) waxes rhapsodic about the experience. Heinlein has the experience of moonwalking down exactly, twenty years before Neil Armstrong. The tour the Devil’s Graveyard, a series of natural spires (nothing like it has been found, alas) and Dickie mentions that being there is even better than seeing the pictures in *Spaceways Magazine*. They visit the memorial to the first atomic laboratory and power plant, which exploded in 1984 for unknown reasons.

They are getting ready to go back, when the mother realizes that the runt is gone. The father drills Dickie, the mother collapses, and Mr. Perrin goes searching. Mr. Perrin has them bring the tour group back inside, and they wait anxiously in the control room. The mother comforts Dickie, and says it couldn’t be his fault (one of the signs of her strength is her emotional support when others are in pain). Dickie worries about the runt, and remembers when he broke an aquarium and watched the fish suffocate. He wants to go searching, but they won’t let him. But then he suggests that he knows the runt, and thinks he can get lost the same way, so they take him out.

Dickie finds his brother. They bring him back, and Mr. Perrin asks the parents to promise not to come back to the Moon. But Dickie tells Mr. Perrin he will be back, and Mr. Perrin says he knew that already.

Tests / Quizzes:

Personally, I do not care for many published textbook tests/quizzes, as I often find them to not fit what we have actually discussed in class, or what the students have themselves found in the text. I therefore tend to make up my own quizzes and tests, and I also rely heavily on questions about relationships, more than I do questions about specific details of the books. I teach very poor readers, and I am far more concerned that they understand what is happening between the characters, than I am in what color shirt a particular character is wearing, or some other pithy little detail that teachers dealing with very good readers might ask to make sure that their students have read. I check to make sure they've read by insisting that they answer the following kinds of questions using specific details (and by always asking a question about the end of the chapter), but I allow them to choose the details themselves to fit the question. I train them to answer questions this way by giving them several sample questions, then answering them on the board, using their input to craft a model response. I hope that the following questions are useful for quizzes and tests, as well as for classroom discussion. Again, I expect students to use specific details from the novel to answer these questions. If the extra credit questions seem appropriate for your class, you can add them to the quizzes, or use them as extra credit homework assignments.

1. Why was mumblety-peg a more interesting game on Earth?
2. How would you describe the character of the narrator?
3. How would you describe the character of his brother, the "runt"?
4. What happened to the first atomic lab on the moon?
5. What happened to the runt?
6. Why was Dickie able to find him?

Extra Credit Questions:

1. Why name the power plants "Rutherford"?
2. What was Oak Ridge?

Vocabulary Words (these are all words I've had students ask me about):

p. 1: runt

p. 3: improbable

p. 6: yap

Essay Questions and Projects:

1. Write an essay explaining the answer to the question, "Why do adults talk in front of kids as if they couldn't understand English?"
2. Research the mythological names of all the spires in the Devil's Graveyard and suggest why Heinlein would use those names. Include a description and pictures of the Garden of the Gods in Colorado.
3. Read Robert Heinlein's two other connected works to this story, "Blowups Happen" and the nonfiction article "Back of the Moon" and lay out the connections between all three.
4. Grade Robert Heinlein as a predictor of what space travel and walking on the moon would be like, by comparing this story with accounts by the Apollo astronauts who walked on the moon.