

“Tenderfoot in Space” Lesson Plans

By

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Introduction:

“Tenderfoot in Space” is one of several Boy Scout science fiction stories that Robert Heinlein wrote, or intended to write. The first, “Nothing Ever Happens on the Moon” is the best of them; the last, never written, was tentatively titled “Polar Scout.” This one is for the dog lovers in the audience. Heinlein’s first draft was severely edited, by Heinlein; space requirements, and the realization that his audience in *Boys’ Life* would have included much younger readers, seems to have led him to simplify the style more than he normally did in his juveniles (actually, Heinlein wrote more sophisticated vocabulary and subject matter in many of his juveniles, believing that his readers at that age liked a challenge). The result is a story that leaves many adult readers feeling disappointed, unlike most of his juveniles. My personal opinion is that they must be cat people. I have always found the story charming (despite having both dogs and cats in my life).

We hope you find the following lesson plans helpful, and that you will choose “*Tenderfoot in Space*” 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:

The story was never collected in Heinlein’s lifetime, but was one of the uncollected stories placed in *Requiem*, the tribute volume published shortly after his death by Yoji Kondo and Virginia Heinlein. It can also be found on the Heinlein Society Educators CD.

Date of Publication / Dedication:

“Tenderfoot in Space” was published in May 1958, in *Boys Life*.

Summary / Discussion Notes:

Each chapter 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 story opens with a boy and his dog, both hungry. Charlie Vaughn has run away from home with his dog, Nixie, who wants nothing but to be with her boy. He is an extremely well-trained dog, and Heinlein portrays Nixie as capable of reading emotions, and emotional nuances. One of the narrative pleasantries is the regular shift to the dog’s point of view, and back; it is all handled very smoothly (Hemingway gets kudos for this in lit classes all the time). Charlie is trying to decide if he is going to get the job in the supermarket, but there is a cop there. The cop sees him, and Charlie tries to pretend he is someone else, but the cop calls out Nixie’s name, and he is recognized. It is at this point, having established this essential relationship between boy and dog, and intrigued his readers with wondering why this boy is a runaway, that Heinlein turns on the sense of wonder: Charlie has run away from home because he doesn’t want to go to Venus.

Or more precisely, he doesn’t want to go to Venus without Nixie. The cop berates him for not being a good Scout – brave, trustworthy, obedient – and Charlie reveals why as a result. The cop makes Charlie promise on Scout’s Honor not to run away again, then sends him to his house for his wife to feed them.

His parents are angry and sad, and Charlie is being stubborn. Charlie’s father asks him if he needs to lock all the doors, and Charlie says no. Charlie goes to bed crying, and Nixie breaks the rules of the bed to comfort him by allowing Charlie to hold him. Later, after Charlie has gone to sleep, Nixie goes back to his part of the bed.

Charlie’s parents discuss the problem: they can’t afford the weight allowance. It’s not just the weight of the dog; it’s the weight of his food, and water, and air. It would cost three thousand dollars to take Nixie (as a rough estimate, a comic book in 1955 cost ten cents; today, it is three dollars; so, three thousand dollars today might be \$90,000). Charlie’s father basically comes down to this decision: give the dog away, or put it to sleep. What the parents are completely missing, especially the father, is the emotional connection, the sense of worth Nixie holds for Charlie. But the seeds of a solution have been laid: they transport animals in suspended animation, in “sleep-freeze.”

Nixie thinks of Charlie as his pet; the parents are “pets of his pet.” Charlie’s father wants to know his decision; Charlie insists he is staying, and that his parents can sign him over to the state school. Charlie’s father refuses to abdicate his responsibility as his father, and tells Charlie he is going; he will pay his way back at eighteen if he wants,

but he is going. Charlie's father then offers Charlie a third choice: ship Nixie in sleep-freeze. It's only a 50-50 shot, but Charlie decides to take it.

Nixie is upset about the movers; dogs like order.

Nixie gets to go to a Scout meeting; there is a comic bit where the reader is led to suspect Nixie had an accident indoors, only to find out he chased a cat and knocked over some cocoa. They make Nixie a Scout in good standing, as a going away present to Charlie. Nixie has been highly trained by Charlie and Obedience School. Charlie sends him forward to receive his badge. He can salute and bark on command, and does so when he receives her badge.

They begin the travel to go to Venus; Nixie has to be put into a traveling case, and isn't happy about it. When he sees Charlie, he has a "puppyish accident." Nixie is put to sleep. There is some Heinleinian meditation on the nature of the self, and consciousness. The veterinarian offers to find Nixie a home, because even at his best, 40% of the animals die. Charlie refuses.

They travel to Venus, and the trip is described succinctly and proficiently, as Heinlein has done in so many places. It is all so matter of fact, yet thrilling. Charlie sees the famous hero Nordhoff, and decides he wants to be an explorer too someday.

The problem with space travel is boredom. They do everything they can to alleviate it, but boredom persists.

There is a moment of the kind of lesson Heinlein wants to teach throughout his stories for young people, when Charlie questions why rich people should have luxuries they don't; his father answers, "Why should we have something we haven't paid for?"

Charlie starts to help the cook, nicknamed Slim (he isn't). Slim is an autodidact, a man who has read every book he can get his hands on. They talk about Venus, and how funny it was that nobody thought you could live there (which actually turns out to be true, but it is interesting that Heinlein puts this whole conversation in as a way to forestall arguments).

Heinlein then slips in another lesson: "Nobody is entitled to an opinion about something he is ignorant of." Another one is not to worry about death; it will come when it comes. Charlie is terribly worried about Nixie's survival.

They land, and Charlie has to wait through long quarantine. Charlie is then given a choice to go to watch Nixie be revived, and he goes. The doctor doesn't want him there, but Charlie stays.

Nixie survives.

Charlie stays up with Nixie all night to make sure he doesn't slip back into coma.

Nixie is very happy in his new home; lots of new smells. There are so few dogs on Venus that Nixie is spoiled rotten. Charlie decides he wants to be a pioneer on Venus, deep into the jungle that dominates the planet. The whole planet is full of riches, waiting to be taken: "But it did not offer it to sissies."

Heinlein then enters into one of his arguments about the failure of public education, similar to that within *Have Spacesuit, Will Travel*. Charlie is bored in the school, and the teacher then points out all the problems with his old school: no flunking, social promotion, no real education. On Venus, education is voluntary after they learn the three R's. Venus will let a student go to school as long as he wants to learn, but they will not waste money on students who don't want to learn. Charlie decides he wants to learn, and discovers that his teacher is quite good when Charlie is prepared to listen.

Charlie rejoins the Boy Scouts on Venus. Mr. Qu'an, the Scoutmaster, is very impressed with Charlie, but he has to start all over here on Venus. Charlie is a tenderfoot again. Charlie is teamed with Hans Kuppenheimer, "the best jungle rat in the troop." Hans is 23...in Venusian years. Nixie is immediately made the mascot of the troop. The Scoutmaster asks about his name, because a nixie is a water sprite. He actually got his name from Charlie saying "nix" so many times – old American slang for "no." One of the scouts, Alf, objects to Nixie being made a full Scout – and they drill Charlie about Nixie following the Scout rules. Nixie and Charlie are fully inducted.

They are about to set off on a hike, and Mr. Qu'an suggests sending Nixie home. Hans is willing to take the dog along. Hans is actually scared of Nixie; the dog is a predator, and Hans has been trained to be wary of predators. Charlie gets Hans used to Nixie, and they become good friends too.

Heinlein has worked out an entirely new way of finding your way about an eternally cloudy planet. He goes into great deal of detail on all this. Scouts dig this stuff (my son is a Scout, and has learned how to use a compass in similar detail). They go on their hike. One Scout gets a screwworm, and Mr. Qu'an has to cut it out. Hans teaches Charlie various ways of survival – what to eat, how to drink, what not to touch. Hans tells about being stung by a dragonfly – and how delicious it was for their next meal. They set up camp; Hans and Charlie gather oil weed. They put up protections against dragonflies; they see one later on.

Hans invites Charlie and Nixie to come stay with him. Hans' mother feeds them, and agrees to call Charlie's parents. Hans takes Charlie to see the land Hans intends to. Hans teaches him about compass bugs. Hans has him remove the leeches. Hans kills a dragonfly for lunch. They learn that the dragonflies are about to swarm. Hans shows him a waterfall he plans to use for power, then gets stung in the back. Charlie kills it, but Hans is paralyzed. Charlie has to try and carry him back to the farm, over his back. Charlie hurts his leg, and it goes numb. Charlie breaks down crying when he can't carry Hans any more.

Charlie sends Nixie to go get Hans' mother. Nixie to the rescue!

Nixie has saved the boys. He is given a medal for life saving. He salutes.

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 does Charlie run away?
2. Describe Charlie's relationship with Nixie.
3. What problem does Charlie have?
4. How do they solve it?
5. What is life aboard ship like?
6. Describe Charlie's relationship with Slim.
7. How do Charlie and Nixie fit in on Venus?
8. What happens with Nixie joining the Scouts?
7. Describe how they have to navigate on Venus.
8. Discuss the survival lessons Hans teaches Charlie.
9. What bad thing happens to Hans? And to Charlie?
10. How does Nixie save them?

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

- p. 50: accommodations; viands
- p. 51: contrariwise
- p. 52: shaggy; carcass
- p. 53: conferring; disconsolately
- p. 55: snappishly
- p. 67: reverent; rascalions
- p. 73: jigger
- p. 74: crestfallen
- p. 75: encroachment
- p. 80: tromping

Essay Questions and Projects:

1. Research the emotional capacities of dogs (there has been a substantial amount of work done in this field in the last thirty years; there is an excellent Nova episode on this, for example). How accurate was Heinlein in describing dogs?
2. Contact a local Boy Scout group and ask them to read this story, then interview the boys about their impressions of it. Then present this reader-response as a test of Heinlein's capacity to entertain and enlighten across the generations.