

## THE POLITICAL DR. SEUSS Lesson Plan

### *Dr. Seuss and Universal Themes*

[pbs.org/independentlens/politicaldrseuss](http://pbs.org/independentlens/politicaldrseuss)

**Grade levels:** 7 to 12

**Estimated time:** Three class periods (but the assessment activity may be assigned for homework)

#### **Introduction:**

Students should already realize that the literature they read in school conveys themes and lessons that apply to various life situations and experiences. It may surprise them, however, that young children's stories also impart important themes and lessons. The Dr. Seuss books are particularly good examples of this.

In this lesson, students will discover some of the themes of Dr. Seuss's major books. By viewing excerpts from THE POLITICAL DR. SEUSS and examining the film's Web site, they will see how, despite being written for young children, Dr. Seuss' books contain powerful messages about important themes in American history and society. The students will conclude by creating posters to showcase one of these themes.

#### **Lesson objectives:**

Students will:

- Discuss the main ideas and lessons of a work of literature, short story, or poem they've recently read.
- Discuss themes from children's books they've read in the past.
- Watch excerpts from THE POLITICAL DR. SEUSS and take notes on the main ideas of several Dr. Seuss books.
- Add their own words to a list of words and phrases that describe themes in the Dr. Seuss books.
- Explore three Dr. Seuss books featured on THE POLITICAL DR. SEUSS Web site, and choose words from their list to describe the themes in these books.
- Discuss the themes they've explored in the Dr. Seuss books.
- Create posters to illustrate one theme Dr. Seuss addresses in his books.

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#### Materials needed:

- Computers with Internet access
- TV and VCR
- THE POLITICAL DR. SEUSS video
- A handout with the following words and phrases listed: corruption, power, human rights, racism, tolerance, environmental stewardship, greed, pollution, war, anti-Semitism, Hitler, Holocaust, Cold War

#### Standards

(<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>):

#### Language Arts:

Standard 6: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts

Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media

#### Teaching strategy:

1. Hold a brief class discussion on a work of literature, short story, or poem that students have recently read, either in your class or in another class that all your students have in common. Ask students to describe the themes, main points and lessons that the reading conveyed. Discuss the ways in which the author conveyed these messages. The following questions may be helpful in this discussion:
  - What themes and lessons come up in this book or story? Does the story have a moral?
  - Are the themes and lessons stated up front, or does the author use metaphors or other techniques to disguise the main points? How easy or difficult was it for you to "get" the main points?
  - How do you feel about the main themes and lessons of this story? Do you agree or disagree with the author's view that these lessons are important?
2. Take a few minutes to discuss themes from books students may have read as younger children, including the Dr. Seuss books. Do students remember the lessons they learned from any of these childhood stories?
3. Make sure students understand that many of the books they have read, both

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recently and as younger children, contain important messages and lessons. One of the most important functions of literature, whether for teenagers, adults, or young children, is to convey a message, lesson, or overall idea that the author feels is important. As students will see shortly, Dr. Seuss conveyed political and social themes that he felt were important.

4. Show the following excerpts from THE POLITICAL DR. SEUSS. After viewing each segment, ask students to determine the main lesson or theme Dr. Seuss wanted to convey in that particular cartoon or book. Have them write down those main ideas on their own piece of paper, next to the name of each book. Pause after each book is discussed on the video to verify that students understand the book's main ideas.

- 01:36:36 – 01:38:28: *Horton Hears A Who*

Themes: democratization in post-war Japan, treating Japanese people with respect and really listening to them

Explain that the United States occupied Japan after World War II, and this is the period *Horton* is dealing with

- 01:38:28 – 01:41:15: *Yertle the Turtle*

Themes: Hitler, thirst for power

- 01:41:16 – 01:45:18 *The Sneetches*

Themes: anti-Semitism, racism, tolerance

Explain to students that the Nazis often required Jews to wear yellow stars on their clothing to identify themselves as Jewish

- 01:49:12 - 01:50:52: *The Cat in the Hat*

Themes: general subversion and rebellion against authority, new optimism and energy of the 1960s

- 02:03:09 – 02:07:33: *The Lorax*

Themes: conservation, corporate greed, against the consumer culture

- 02:09:58 – 02:17:14: *The Butter Battle Book*

Themes: Cold War, against silly conflict that escalates into a dangerous situation

5. Give students a handout with these words and phrases listed: corruption, power, human rights, racism, tolerance, environmental stewardship, greed, pollution, war, anti-Semitism, Hitler, Holocaust, Cold War. Ask students if they are familiar with all

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of these terms, and define any of the ones they don't know. They may realize that these words and phrases describe themes that appear in some of the Dr. Seuss books they've learned about in the video.

6. Discuss students' ideas about and reactions to the video excerpts as a class. What words and phrases did they use to describe the books discussed in the video? Which words and phrases on the handout apply to these books?
7. Have students add words and phrases to the handout from their own observations of the Dr. Seuss books, as described in the video. For example, if they wrote "anti-war" in their notes while watching the video excerpt on *The Butter Battle Book*, they should add "anti-war" to the list on their handout.
8. Have students go to the Web site for THE POLITICAL DR. SEUSS (<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/politicaldrseuss/>). Ask them to select "The Gallery" from the left side of the screen and then select "Enter Gallery" at the lower right. Have them look at the following Dr. Seuss drawings and list the name of the book each drawing is from on their own paper. Have students read the captions and look carefully at the drawings.
  - bottom row, fourth (middle) drawing (*Yertle the Turtle*)
  - bottom row, sixth drawing (*The Lorax*)
  - bottom row, last drawing (*The Butter Battle Book*)
9. Ask students to examine the list of words and phrases on their handouts and match the drawings and captions to the words and phrases that they feel apply to each of the three Dr. Seuss books listed above. For example, for *The Lorax*, students might list "corruption," "power," "environmental stewardship," "greed" and "pollution."
10. Discuss the ways in which the general social and political themes on the handout relate to Dr. Seuss's work. Which of his books address which themes? What techniques does Dr. Seuss use to get his points across? Why do students think Dr. Seuss wanted to convey these messages, rather than simply writing engaging children's books? Do students think Dr. Seuss's style of conveying important themes in children's book is effective?

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#### **Assessment:**

Ask each student or small group to choose one theme that Dr. Seuss used in his books. Have them create posters showing examples of stories and drawings that illustrate this theme. The stories and drawings may be taken from Dr. Seuss, other authors, or students' own original work, depending on your time frame. The theme should be written prominently at the top of the poster to serve as its title.

If time is short, have students draw their own versions of the Dr. Seuss characters or completely new characters whose behaviors represent the same themes. They should add text to describe how the characters represent the theme.

If you have more time, students may research other authors who have written on the themes Dr. Seuss included in his books, such as racism, tolerance and environmental stewardship. They should include drawings and text showing how these authors' stories and characters represent the theme students have selected.

#### **Extension ideas:**

- Have students read a Dr. Seuss book of their choice and determine whether it has any of the themes they've discussed in this lesson. If so, ask them to list these themes and write a paragraph explaining the book's message with regard to the themes. If not, ask them to list the themes they believe the book does express and to write a paragraph explaining how those themes are presented in the book.
- The following may be done before or after students complete the assessment activity:

Read a Dr. Seuss book to the class. It would be preferable to read one of the books discussed in the video, such as *The Lorax*. Allow students to look at the pictures, and ask them to think about the messages and main points of the story.

Discuss the main ideas and themes in the book. Also discuss the techniques Dr. Seuss uses to convey these messages and themes. Some examples of techniques include using simple words and word structure, specific words or phrases that rhyme or repeat, drawings, and characters' actions. How do his techniques help get his points across?



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#### Online resources:

THE POLITICAL DR. SEUSS:

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"Said a Bird in the Midst of a Blitz...": How World War II Created Dr. Seuss: [http://www.umanitoba.ca/publications/mosaic/backlist/2001/June/34\\_2%20Nel%20essay.pdf](http://www.umanitoba.ca/publications/mosaic/backlist/2001/June/34_2%20Nel%20essay.pdf)  
(for very advanced readers)

#### About the author

Betsy Hedberg is a teacher and freelance curriculum writer who has published lesson plans on a variety of subjects. She received her secondary teaching credential in social studies from Loyola Marymount University and her master of arts in geography from UCLA. In addition to curriculum writing, she presents seminars and training sessions to help teachers incorporate the Internet into their classrooms.