

The Devil and Tom Walker

by Washington Irving

Synopsis **3**

Lesson Plan Overview **4**

Learning Objectives

Skills

Assumed Knowledge

Resources and Materials

Estimated Time

Class Profile

Common Core Standards

Previous Lesson **5**

Main Lesson **7**

Following Lesson **11**

Handouts and Worksheets **12**



The Devil and Tom Walker

by Washington Irving

An American literary folk tale, “The Devil and Tom Walker” condemns the greed and moral decay prevalent in colonial New England.

In the story, set in “about” 1727, Washington Irving alludes to the destruction of Native Americans and the theft of their lands, to slavery, and to the financial recklessness that drove get-rich-quick speculators to ruin. The plot unfolds outside Boston, once a bastion of firm religious belief, and throughout the tale, Irving juxtaposes the greed and moral decay of the Massachusetts colony with piety and religious hypocrisy.

The conflict between the two extremes is embodied in Tom Walker, a character so greedy that he sells his soul to the devil in exchange for wealth. At the beginning of the story, Tom encounters the devil in the gloom of a swamp outside Boston. The devil offers Tom a deal—Captain Kidd’s buried treasure in exchange for Tom’s soul and his agreeing to use the money to do the devil’s work. Tom accepts but

refuses to be a slave trader—that is too evil, even for him. Instead he agrees to be a usurer and makes his fortune lending to land speculators; he charges outrageous interest and collects from his debtors with no concern for their financial situations. As he grows older, Tom fears repaying his debt to the devil and becomes a religious zealot in a hypocritical effort to save his soul. In the end, however, the devil carries him away as Tom is foreclosing on another mortgage.

Much of Irving’s social criticism is accomplished through symbolism. The names of leading men of New England are carved by the devil on huge trees in the swamp; the trees appear to be flourishing but are rotting inside, waiting for the devil to harvest them, symbolic of taking the men’s souls. The mansion Tom builds for himself, but is too cheap to furnish, also has symbolic significance.

In “The Devil and Tom Walker,” Washington Irving adapts the Faustian legend of selling one’s soul, writing it as a folk tale within the context of the history of New England. Like Faust, Tom comes to regret the bargain he makes with the devil and pays the highest price for his greed. Additionally, the story is a masterful critique of uniquely American experiences.

Moral Decay Revealed through Motifs and Symbols

This lesson plan focuses on Irving’s use of literary motifs and symbols in developing the story’s themes. Students will examine several motifs and symbols and interpret how they suggest moral decay in the characters and their society. In studying the motifs and symbols, students will be better able to describe “The Devil and Tom Walker” as an example of social criticism.

Lesson Plan Overview / Moral Decay Revealed through Motifs and Symbols

Estimated Time

60 min.**Skills**

Close reading / Drawing inferences from the text / Identifying and interpreting symbols and motifs / Drawing themes from the text

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- define “motif” and analyze major motifs in the story: darkness/gloom, greed, and hypocrisy
- define “symbol” and interpret major symbols in the story: the swamp, the “great trees” in the swamp, and Tom’s mansion, horses, and carriage
- describe how the story’s theme of moral decay is developed through the motifs and symbols

Resources & Materials

- www.owleyes.org
- Owl Eyes Classroom
- “The Devil and Tom Walker” from the Owl Eyes Library
- Handouts:
 - *Studying Motifs in “The Devil and Tom Walker”*
 - *Interpreting Symbolism in “The Devil and Tom Walker”*
 - *Key: Studying Motifs in “The Devil and Tom Walker”*
 - *Key: Interpreting Symbolism in “The Devil and Tom Walker”*
- Computers or tablets; paper and pencil

Common Core Standards

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4**
Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

Assumed Knowledge

- Students can use a computer to access information and navigate a web site.
- Students have experience with taking notes and annotating texts.
- Students know the register and genre of the lecture style and have participated in cooperative learning activities.
- Students should be familiar with motifs, symbols, and themes and be able to identify them in the text with support.
- Students have read “The Devil and Tom Walker” and know the setting, characters, plot, and historical context.
 - For suggestions in providing students with instruction and practice regarding historical context, please refer to the Previous Lesson that follows.

Class Profile

This lesson is appropriate for high school students of different racial/ethnic heritages, cultural experiences, and reading skills who are studying English literature in grades 11 and 12. Some elements in the lesson are consistent with the content found in Advanced Placement Literature classes and dual credit courses in literature.

Main Lesson / Moral Decay Revealed through Motifs and Symbols

Time /
Interaction

Stage

Aims

10 min.

T-CL

Pre-Main Event

Explain to students that the moral of a story or the themes (main ideas) in it can be communicated through motifs and symbols in the narrative.

Write “motif” on the board, and review its definition. Define it for students as an element in a literary work that occurs again and again throughout the text; point out that a motif, for instance, could be an image, an idea, a color, or a particular phrase or statement that appears in numerous places in the text. Explain that there are several motifs in “The Devil and Tom Walker” and that together you will be examining three of them: darkness/gloom, greed, and hypocrisy. Write the three motifs on the board under the heading “motif.”

Write “symbol” on the board, and review its definition. Define it for students as an object or a place that stands for or communicates an idea; point out that a symbol often appears more than once in the text.

Have students confer with a partner and list some objects or places in the story that seem to represent more than their literal identity. With students sharing their lists in a class discussion, establish that the swamp, the “great trees” in the swamp, and Tom’s mansion, carriage, and horses are major symbols in the story. Write the three symbols on the board under the heading “symbol.”

Primary Aim

Identify major motifs and symbols in the story

Secondary Aims

- Review definitions of “motif” and “symbol”
- Establish the relationship between motifs/symbols and theme

S-S

OCFB

30 min.

T-CL

Main Event

Tell students that they will now work in groups to locate and analyze examples of the motifs and symbols in the story. Explain that they will work with the text on Owl Eyes, highlight examples in the text, and answer questions about them. Explain further that half the class will focus on the motifs and half will examine the symbols.

Divide students into groups of 6. Explain that each group will have a “reporter” to share their research with the class; appoint a reporter for each group, or let students choose their own.

Distribute the handouts, giving half of the groups “Studying Motifs in ‘The Devil and Tom Walker’” and giving the remaining groups “Interpreting Symbolism in ‘The Devil and Tom Walker.’” Answer any

*(continued on next page)***Primary Aim**

Identify theme by analyzing and interpreting motif and symbolism in the story

Secondary Aims

- Practice close reading skills to draw supporting details from the text
- Deepen understanding and develop communication skills through discourse and cooperative learning

T-CL / Teacher-Classroom • S-S / Pair Work • S-S-S / Group Work • OCFB / Open Class Feedback



Worksheet / Studying Motifs in “The Devil and Tom Walker”

Work with the members of your group to complete this activity.

Divide the motifs in your group so that some members research *darkness and gloom*, some research *greed*, and some research *hypocrisy*.

Locate and highlight passages in the story that illustrate these motifs, and answer the following questions. When you have finished highlighting the text and answering the questions, share your research with the group.

I. Locate and highlight passages in the story that illustrate these motifs:

- Darkness and gloom
- Greed
- Hypocrisy

II. Discuss the passages and answer these questions:

1. Darkness and gloom

What takes place in a dark or gloomy environment?

What are darkness and gloom associated with?

2. Greed

Who is motivated by greed?

What are some things they do out of greed?

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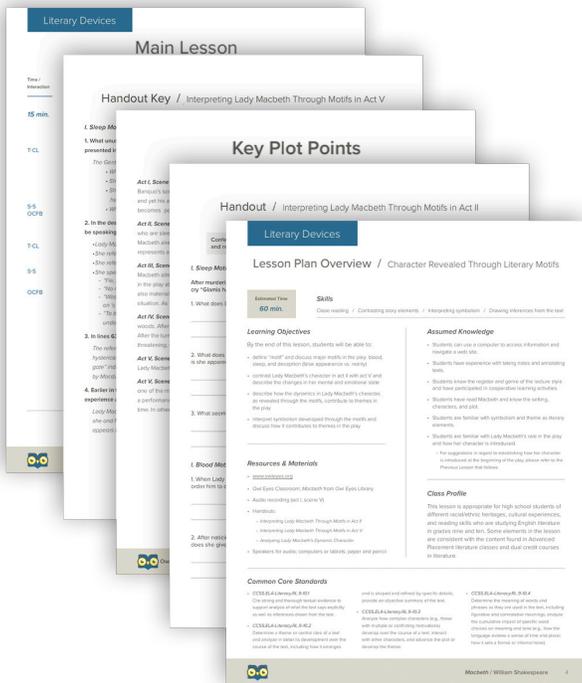
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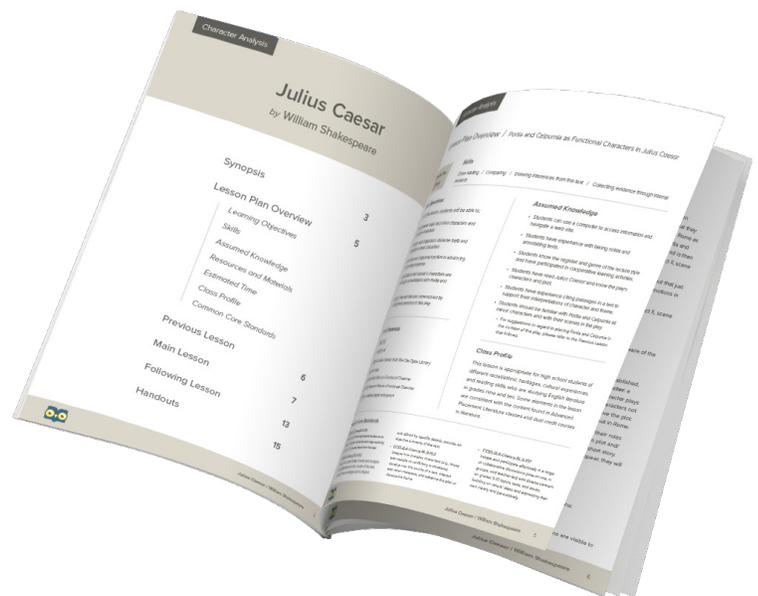
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