

## **Lesson Plans: *Catherine Called Birdy***

These lesson plans are intended to assist teachers and students in making the connection between a good story and the process of making it a stage play. Activities are included in which students will dramatize a situation, emotion or conversation. Doing this will help students become better at comprehending what is happening in a story. The activities are all based on Indiana Standards for Theatre. The standards given are multi-grade level so teachers from more than one grade level can use them or activities can be used in classes where students have varying levels of ability.

The lesson plans are divided into 4 categories. The first category, Mechanics, addresses character, theme, plot, setting, conflict, etc. The second category is called Experience and has activities related to watching the play or dramatizing from the story. The third category of activities deals with Writing, and the fourth category is called Evaluate. In this category, students will respond to, make judgments about, select criteria, and speculate on the meaning of the story, its parts, or the dramatization.

Thank you for including Chicago Street Theatre in your activities for your class. Live theatre is one way in which students can better comprehend the story, make connections and draw conclusions about what they read. By attending this performance and studying the theatre alongside the book, they will be touched by the power of this living art form.

Enjoy!

### **Catherine Called Birdy: Mechanics**

*Activities in this category will address the following standards:*

6.3.1 Explain the use of character, plot, and setting in classroom dramatizations and/or formal productions. Ex. Students summarize a play's plot construction (rising action, climax, resolution)

7.3.1 Explore thematic and character elements of a play.

8.3.1 Scrutinize a character's actions and the consequences they create.

8.3.2 Examine how the plot and dialogue of a play contributes to its overall impact.

6.5.2, 7.5.2 Compare the character's conflict or problems to the real life concerns of the audience.  
8.5.2 Apply the play's conflict or problems to the political and social concerns of the contemporary world.

#### **Activity 1 (Character)**

In a guided classroom discussion list the characters in the story and have the students create an entry in that person's diary. From this entry, we should be able to learn what is important to the character and get an idea about the type of person that character is. What does this character want most in the story? How does this character feel about other characters in the play? What does the character do to achieve his or her goal? Is this personal reflection similar or different to how Catherine perceives the character?

#### **Activity 2 (Character, Theme)**

Birds are an important theme and symbol within Cushman's book. Why is Catherine "called Birdy?" What kinds of birds is Catherine compared to in the play? Do the types of birds

mentioned change throughout the play? What do they symbolize? How did the playwright and director draw attention to this theme?

### **Activity 3 (Plot, Cause and Effect, Impact)**

Summarize the play's plot construction. Locate the play's climactic decision, the point at which the protagonist is forced to make a decision that will determine the outcome of the play. (Catherine decides she will marry Shaggy Beard in exchange for Perkin receiving her family's cottage.) What are the significant events (rising action) leading up to this decision? (Suitors 1 and 2, Perkin's cough, the kiss, the argument.) Does the play resolve in the way we would expect following the climactic decision? What would be the logical outcome of Catherine's decision? Both the novelist and playwright use a device called the *deus ex machina*:

1. (in ancient Greek and Roman drama) a god introduced into a play to resolve the entanglements of the plot.
2. any artificial or improbable device resolving the difficulties of a plot.

*Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Random House, Inc. 16 Feb. 2007.

Discuss the use of this device in both the novel and play. Which of the two definitions does its use in *Catherine Called Birdy* best fit? Why? The philosopher Aristotle condemned its use as weak playwriting. Audiences applaud its happy endings. How do you feel about the use of this device?

### **Activity 4 (Theme, Plot, Impact)**

Write a list of typical themes for literature and theatre on the blackboard: love, family, money, religion, etc. Have students read the entry for their birthday in Cushman's book. What themes are present in their individual readings? Tally the answers on the board to see the overriding themes in Cushman's book. How are these themes represented in Massiola's play? Were any events from the students' readings included or excluded from the plot of the play? Any characters? Why do you think the playwright chose to exclude some events and characters? How did this impact your reaction to the play?

### **Activity 5 (Conflict)**

Catherine lives in a world much different than ours. In her author's note, Cushman notes many differences between the England of 1290 and society of today: 1) "Everyone had a particular place in a community, be it village, abbey, manor, family or guild." 2) "Our ideas of individual identity, individual effort and success did not exist." 3) "Time in these villages moved slowly -- The future, then, to most medieval English meant not next week or next year or 1300, but the world to come, the afterlife, eternity, Heaven and Hell. Since the Church has a say who went there in the next life, it had great authority in this one." 4) Girls were mostly trained for marriage. Marriage among the noble classes was not a matter of love but of economics." She asks, "Can we really understand medieval people well enough to write books about them? I think we can identify with those qualities that we share--As for the rest, we'll have to imagine and pretend and make room in our hearts for all sorts of different people."

Do any of the conflicts that existed for Catherine exist for us today? In what ways can you relate to Catherine and her problems? What "qualities" do we share? What are some of the differences? What qualities in the play helped you to relate to the characters and their problems?

### **Catherine Called Birdy: Experience**

*Activities in this category will address the following standards:*

6.6.1, 7.6.1, 8.6.1 Improvise scenes from literature; Generate dialogue for a short scene using improvisation

6.6.3 Explore the use of sounds and the voice to express character, feelings and mood.

Standard 7: Students utilize imagination and research to design and implement the elements of a visual environment.

7.9.1 Discover the skills needed to be a theatrical designer

#### **Activity 1 (improvise a scene)**

From the book, choose an entry from Catherine's diary that describes an event, but does not include dialogue. In pairs or small groups, spend 10 minutes improvising dialogue and action based on the event in the book. Perform them for the class. Can the class identify the characters from the story, the conflict, the setting?

#### **Activity 2 (sounds and voice)**

Divide the class into pairs. Each pair must choose and imitate a birdcall unique to their pairing. Once each pair masters their sound, have the students scatter about the space. With eyes closed, have the students make their unique call. Without opening their eyes, students must reunite with their partners using only their birdcall to find their partner. After the exercise, discuss each student's experience. What kinds of birdcalls did they hear? How did their birdcalls change as they searched for their partner? How did they use volume, tone, and rhythm to communicate with their partner?

#### **Activity 3 (design a set)**

Read the description of Catherine's room and the murals she paints on her wall:

"The sun is shining, so I have thrown open the shutter in my chamber to let light and air in. I love my chamber when it is warm and sunny. In the middle is the bed I share with Morwenna, large and high, with curtains all around and a trundle under where the serving maids sleep. At the foot is a chest, carved and dark with age that looks as if it should be full of treasure but instead it is stuffed with old clothes. On the right wall is my mural of Heaven and Hell. On the left are three pegs for my gowns and cloaks. And straight ahead is the window, shutters open now, and a stool pulled up, so I can sit and write and look over the yard to the hills and meadow beyond."

" I have mixed water and eggs with my writing inks to make paint for my chamber walls, where I am painting a scene from Heaven, with dogs and birds who look like me, angels with my mother's face, and saints with the faces of Edward and Aelis and George. Below is Hell, where poor souls with my father's face writhe in eternal torment. I gave God Perkin's face since Perkin is the wisest person I know, but Morwenna flew into a terrible fright, wailing about blasphemy and damnation, so I painted Perkin out and now God just has sort of a watery face."

How does Catherine use her room to express herself? How is this similar or different to how teens decorate their rooms today? Imagine that you are a scenic designer who has been asked to set *Catherine Called Birdy* in modern times, draw, write a description or find images that would convey Catherine's room and how she feels about herself, parents and friends today.

#### **Activity 4 (design a costume)**

Catherine describes herself as a "gray goose." Pretend that you are a costume designer and design a dress for Catherine using this as an inspiration. Assign birds to other characters in the play and design costumes based on these birds. What do the types of birds and the costumes say about the character?

#### **Catherine Called Birdy: Writing**

*Activities in this category will address the following standards:*

6.6.2 Write a scripted play based on a theme.

7.6.2, 8.6.2 Use fictional or non-fictional resources to create a short script.

#### **Activity 1 (write narrative, dramatize stories)**

Write daily entries in a journal for one week. Choose themes that are similar to *Catherine Called Birdy*. Deliver those entries as monologues or write short scenes based on a theme from your week. Be sure that your short play has a beginning, middle and an end and a conflict and resolution.

#### **Activity 2**

Choose an entry or series of entries from the book *Catherine Called Birdy* that were not dramatized by the playwright and create a short scene based on those entries. Where in the context of the larger play would this scene fit?

#### **Catherine Called Birdy: Evaluation**

*Activities in this category will address the following standards:*

6.4.1, 7.4.1 Develop criteria to critique what they see, hear, and understand; Use age appropriate theatre vocabulary to critique and evaluate the effectiveness of theatrical productions.

7.4.2, 8.4.2 Reflect on the quality of self and peer performances; Differentiate the strengths and weaknesses of self and peer performances.

6.5.1, 8.5.1 Reflect on the qualities of the visual and aural production and how they create the viewer's reaction to the theatre experience; Understand the use of technical elements of a production and evaluate their effect on the meaning of a production.

### **Activity 1 (write response)**

Using the appropriate grade level standard, have students write:

- A thank you note to the actors/theatre.
- A newspaper article describing what they saw, why they liked or disliked the performance, etc.
- An invitation to a friend to go see this play explaining why the friend will like it.
- A critical review of the play

### **Activity 2 (critique)**

Theatre is another way to tell a story. Create a checklist of the elements of a good story and use it to assess the effectiveness of the performance.

Talk about the elements of theatre: set (what's on the stage), character (including costumes, acting, voice, mannerisms), lighting (this can really help or hurt a performance!) and sound (students may not know that many sounds are on a CD that the sound technician created for the show.) Create a tool to evaluate how well a performance used these elements to tell the story.