

Norm, Alive and Well

Grades

9+

Author

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Illustrator

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Author Bio

Andrew Ramirez, a writer from El Paso, Texas, is an LA transplant. His fiction and poems have most recently appeared in *Slake* and *if&when*.

Illustrator Bio

Scott Gandell is a professional illustrator, printmaker, and an entrepreneur. He is a past President of The Society of Illustrators of Los Angeles, and is an alumnus of Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. Scott's work has been published in magazines, newspapers, and books. His work has also been exhibited in galleries in the U.S. and Canada and has been acquired by clients and collectors worldwide.

Summary

In *Norm, Alive and Well*, a bar fight leaves Norm with a knife protruding from his eye, but that doesn't seem to phase Norm. Heading home, life for Norm and his wife goes on pretty much as usual until Norm starts to... dream.

Common Core Anchor Standards Addressed

Writing Anchor Standards-Text Types and Purposes

- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

Research for Building and Presenting Knowledge

- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

READING Standards

Key Ideas and Details

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.
- Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

Craft and Structure

- Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.
- Analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the audience or reader (e.g., created through the use of dramatic irony) create such effects as suspense or humor.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Academic Vocabulary to Explore

(See vocabulary approach in Appendix A of CCSS.)

Tier Two

Attributed
Blustered
Comprehend
Ensure
Knobby
Plummeted
Strutted
Subconscious
Tunnel vision

Complementary Short Story and Poem to Introduce BEFORE Reading the Text

Short Story: *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, by James Thurber.

God's Grandeur

by Gerard Manley Hopkins

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings

Warm-up Questions

(To introduce the story, should be used as a quick write or a journal/reflection piece.)

1. Have you ever had an epiphany?
2. Have you ever felt surprised just when you thought you'd "seen it all?"
3. Have you ever treated something that others might consider strange and abnormal as routine?

Main Idea for Study

An experience is relative to the person having the experience.

Possible Themes for Study

- Human absurdity.
- Life in death.
- The sublime in the mundane.
- Humor in tragedy.
- Resistance to change.

Focus Questions

1. Does Billie take Norm's condition seriously? Does Norm?
2. What does Norm's new dream mean?
3. Does Norm really feel romantic towards Billie at the end of the story?

(The focus questions can be used for a Socratic Seminar and/or a writing assignment.)

Comprehension Questions

1. How does Norm end up with a knife in his eye?
2. Where does Norm end up sleeping after he returns from the bar?
3. What kind of person is Norm?
4. What kind of person is Billie?
5. How does Billie act in response to Norm's condition? What does she do?
6. How does the knife wound change Norm?

7. Where is Norm going at the end of the story?

Text-dependent Questions

These questions may be used for Response to Literature writing pieces. They should not be used as comprehension questions.

1. What inferences can you make about Norm and Billie’s lives prior to the incident at the bar? What do you think their relationship was like?
2. Why does Norm say to Billie, “Tell me you love me”? Does he know he’s going to die? Has Norm’s outlook on his life and relationship changed?
3. Is this story a comedy or a tragedy? Do the funny moments make the tragedy less poignant? Using examples from the text, explain the reasons for your answers.
4. What is the significance of Norm’s new dream for the story? What does it symbolize?
5. What evidence do you find that Norm and Billie find it difficult to change their routine even in the face of an extraordinary event? Have you observed people who have a hard time changing?

Types of Writing – Exercises & Activities

Narrative

1. Dreams are thought to often symbolize our everyday hopes, fears, dream and anxieties—and to help our brains sort through these feelings. Write your own dream for Norm that symbolizes the changes he is going through. Now write a dream for Billie that symbolizes her internal reactions to Norm’s situation.
2. *Norm, Alive and Well* combines elements of both tragedy and comedy. Write a short story that combines elements of tragedy and comedy without lessening the importance of the tragedy.

Descriptive

Write a “coroner’s report” that describes Norm at the time his body was found. Use both your imagination based on what you’ve learned about Norm and his personality, and any details that you can learn from the story. What did he look like? What was the expression on his face? What was he wearing?

What did he have with him? How did the knife and knife wound look?

Expository/Analytic

1. How is Walter Mitty both alike and different from Norm? What is alike and different about their situations and how they are resolved? Use examples from both stories to support your analyses.
2. Read the poem *God's Grandeur* by Gerard Manley Hopkins. What does the poem mean? How is Norm's life and death like this poem?
3. Can the seemingly ordinary aspects of your life also be wonderful? Think about several routine parts of our life—such as making your breakfast or fighting with a sibling—and write about how they could also be special.
4. Have you observed people responding to situations in ways that don't seem to make sense? Write about them.

Possible Instructional Approaches

Activity

1. Read the Obituary section in your local newspaper. Choose one obituary and cut it out of the paper. From the description of the person in the obituary, write a short story about that person's life and death. Imagine what the person's thoughts and feelings might have been near their time of death. Were they thinking about their past? Were they thinking about their death? Were they with people they knew or loved? What kind of person were they? Bring your obituary and your story to class to share.

Students need: Newspapers, scissors, writing materials.

2. Keep a dream journal for one week. Keep a notebook by your bed and each time you have a dream, write down everything you remember about it as soon as possible. Also write down in your journal how you think your dreams might reflect some of your feelings and experiences in your life. Bring your notebook to class and share one of your dreams and reflections.

Students Need: A journal and writing materials.

3. In *Norm, Alive and Well*, Norm somehow experiences enhanced senses in relation to his knife wound. Test your senses. Using a set of 5 baby food jars with their lids, place one type of spice, flower, leaf, or other safe materials (non-toxic and non-harmful) that have a strong smell in each jar. Place the lids on the jars and puncture holes in the lids. Record what is in each jar for your notes. At school, have your fellow students close their eyes, sniff through the holes, and try to guess what is in each jar. Try an experiment—how many of your fellow students smell the same things when they sniff your jars? For instance, if you have a mint leaf in a jar, how many students smell mint or think they smell something different? Write about your observations and experience.

Students Need: 5 baby food jars with lids. Sniffable materials for each jar (non-toxic and safe). Bag to bring the jars to school in.

Field Trip

Take a class trip to the Los Angeles County Coroner's office for a tour and to learn about their anti-drunk driving program. Have the students prepare for the tour by preparing questions that they might ask the coroners regarding their attitudes towards the deaths /deceased people they must investigate.

What makes them look at these people as human and not just as bodies day after day?