

Painted Tales - Almond Blossoms
A Vincent Van Gogh Story
Lesson Plan

By Louise Sarrasin, Educator
Commission scolaire de Montréal (CSDM), Montréal (Québec)

Objective

Give students the opportunity to discover the painter Vincent Van Gogh and to develop an appreciation of his artistic works through the story *Almond Blossoms*, inspired by O. Henry's short story *The Last Leaf*.

Target audience

Students aged 6 to 9

Connections

Languages and literature
Arts and culture
Personal development

Film needed for lesson plan

– *Almond Blossoms* (10 min 1 s)

Summary

This lesson plan will enable students to explore the artistic universe of Vincent Van Gogh through the story *Almond Blossoms*, based on O. Henry's short story *The Last Leaf*.

Start and preparatory activity: Diary or sketches of my pain

Approximate duration: 60 minutes

Begin by asking students to describe the most dreadful day that they have ever experienced or, if they have not had such a day, to talk about an event that they found especially painful. Ask students to tell each other about their experiences in groups of two, then have them come together as a class to recap their discussions. Pay special attention to the feelings they experienced during that day or during that incident. Once the discussion has ended, ask students to paint or sketch this day or event. Have the student pairs show each other their drawings and ask them to pay special attention to the colours and the elements chosen to illustrate this day or event. Ask them also to describe their sketch or painting in one word, a short sentence (for the younger ones) or a short text (for the older ones). Next, show the students Vincent Van Gogh's paintings. Explain to them that, in the next activity, they will get to know what a great painter this man was. They will learn about him by reading the diary of a young girl who writes about her friendship with him and about the sadness she feels at seeing her mother so ill.

ACTIVITY: Once upon a time there was a painter named Van Gogh...

Approximate duration: 75 minutes

Step 1: Start the activity by reviewing the preparatory activity.

Step 2: Show students the first few minutes of the film (*from start to 1 min 11 s*). Ask them why the little girl says that she has just experienced the worst day of her life. Ask students how they react to her statements. Then point out to them the style in which the characters and the house are drawn and how they are made to move in the film (*painted in the style of Van Gogh*). Continue showing the film until the meeting between the girl and the painter (*1 min 11 s to 2 min 20 s*). Gather the students' impressions about the girl first noticing her freckles and about why she is sad. Direct their attention to how the girl chooses to express her sorrow. Ask them to specify why the girl becomes Van Gogh's friend and why she believes that they are alike. Ask them also to describe other children's reactions to the painter and to say what they think about that. Have them compare these children's behaviour with that of the girl and ask them to comment on Van Gogh's reaction.

Step 3 : Continue showing the film (*2 min 20 s to 4 min 54 s*) to enable students to discover Van Gogh's painting technique and to enable them to observe that he keeps one canvas blank for his masterpiece. Ask students to comment on the girl's perception of Van Gogh as a painter and how it differs from that of other people.

Step 4: Continue showing the film (*4 min 54 s to 8 min 28 s*). Ask students to explain what the father says about his wife's illness and to describe how the girl feels with regard to her mother's illness. Continue the discussion by asking them why the mother is counting the almond blossoms on the tree in bloom and how the girl reacts to that. Point out the statement made by the girl: "Vincent tried to make me feel better. He told me everything was going to be all right, but what does he know? He isn't a doctor." Ask students what they think that these words mean and if they agree with the girl.

Step 5: To help us discover Van Gogh, the filmmaker based his work on O. Henry's short story. Ask the student how this approach helps them to get to know the painter better. How does the diary help the viewer to get to know the painter and the little girl?

Step 6: Finish watching the film. Help students understand the ending of the tale and discover the richness of Van Gogh's world. Use the following questions to gain a deeper understanding of this subject: What does Van Gogh do at the end of the film? What does the little girl mean when she says: "and I thought he couldn't save Mommy with his paintings"? What made the greatest impression on you in this film? What have you learned about how Van Gogh painted and lived? According to this film, what colours did Van Gogh use the most in his paintings? How did the music used in this film make you feel?

If you have time, ask your students to find out about the film's musical soundtrack.

Conclude the activity by showing the entire film without breaks, to give students the opportunity to truly enjoy the story and to gain a better understanding of Van Gogh's world.

Recap

Suggested duration: 45 minutes

Have students paint or sketch a tree with leaves in the style of Van Gogh. You can then use all the sketches and paintings to create a mural.

Objective sharing

Ask students to explain what they now know about Van Gogh's life: his style of painting, his favourite colours, his sources of inspiration, etc. Ask students to explain how telling this story makes it easier to get to know this great painter.

Notes:

1. This lesson plan has been designed for students of various age groups. You can adapt it to meet the needs of your students by selecting those questions that are age appropriate for your group.

Webography

- Vincent Van Gogh on Wikipedia website:
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincent_van_Gogh
- Vincent Van Gogh's life and works:
commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Van_Gogh
- Vincent Van Gogh Museum:
vangoghmuseum.nl/vgm/index.jsp