Amy Schlitz’s book Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! set in 1255 England is an extraordinary children’s book that explores life in a medieval village. This is not your typical storybook and is not to be read in the typical fashion. As we learn from the forward, the author—a school librarian—wrote it with the intention that a group of students studying medieval history would put on a dramatization of the book. Because she did not want a couple of students to have the lead roles and the rest to have minor ones, she wrote it as a series of 23 monologues that intertwine. This lesson plan provides background information on the book and suggestions on how to use it.

**Book Title**

Illustrated by Robert Byrd
Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press
Grade level: 5th grade

**Book Summary**

Though the method of reading this book as a play is in itself creative, it is the content within the pages of the book that really makes this book exceptional. First, the monologues provide a rich exploration of the daily life of children from different social classes; some are paupers and some are the children of nobles. For each character, Amy Schlitz provides a snippet of their life, thoughts and feelings. For example, the book begins with Hugo, the lord’s nephew, who talks about his fears and aversion of participating in a boar hunt. Because he needs to show that he is a “man,” he has little choice but to participate in a hunt, and he later suffers from nightmares. In the next monologue, the reader enters Taggot’s world where she has an unusual encounter with Hugo when he needs her help to fit a horseshoe. They have a connection, but what is bittersweet about their encounter is that despite living in the same small village, it will most likely be the only interaction they will ever have in their lives because of their class difference.

The writing itself is elegant and descriptive. Schlitz uses vocabulary of the period and the reader will get a sense of how people presumably spoke in 1255. For difficult words, Schlitz provides notes on the side of the page to explain their meaning.
Even though the monologues are only two or three pages each, they are filled with valuable information and are written in such a way that students can relate to them. First, because all of the characters are between the ages of 10 and 15 years old, creating a connection between the characters and young readers. Schlitz also sets all the monologues on the same day in 1255 and writes each monologue in first person. Because of this, the reader gains insight into each character’s thoughts, joys, and frustrations. One poignant example comes from Barbary, who is given the task of watching over her twin sisters because her stepmother is having a hard time coping. When Barbary sees Isobel, the lord’s daughter, walking down the street in a beautiful dress and followed by a servant, rage and jealousy overcome Barbary, and she flings a heap of dung at Isobel. The reader learns from Barbary herself that she thoroughly regrets her impulsive action. The reader not only gains insight into Barbary, but also learns that Isobel is deeply hurt emotionally by the act and is in a dilemma over whether to tell her father about her ruined dress. Isobel, unaware of who flung the dung, is afraid that her father will punish several boys in retaliation to the dishonor shown to his family.

In these monologues, the author introduces many important themes and concepts that are associated with medieval life. The author successfully provides information not only about the structure of feudalism, but its various impacts on people’s lives. For instance, we learn through Mogg that by law she is required to get her grain milled by the lord’s miller, even though she must wait hours because the mill is broken. Other themes and concepts that are addressed throughout the monologues are pilgrimages, anti-Semitism, the Crusades, serfs, gender and class issues, and apprenticeships. Schlitz expands on several of these themes, and interspaced in the book are six sections where the author provides background information on the three-field system, medieval pilgrimage, the Crusades, falconry, Jews in medieval society, and towns and freedom.

NCSS Standards

Standard Topics

II: Time, Continuity, and Change

III: People, Places, and Environments

IV: Individual Development and Identity

V: Individuals, Group, and Institutions

VI: Power, Authority, and Governance

VII: Production, Distribution, and Consumption

Materials

- Poster boards
- Markers
- Props and simple costumes (optional)
Objectives

Students will …

1. Identify themes associated with the Middle Ages, such as feudalism, the three-field system, etc.

2. State characteristics of a community.

3. Describe several characters in the book and consider how their lives are similar or different from their own.

Procedures *

Going Beyond the Play

*Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!* can simply be performed as a play, and students will presumably benefit greatly from that experience. There are, however, ways to have students go beyond absorbing the one character to gain insight into the themes and concepts of medieval history that are so richly described in the book. Below is a lesson plan that provides suggestions for using this book.

Introducing the topic of the Middle Ages

1. Divide students into groups of four or five students.

2. Distribute a list of words (provided below) and explain that students may or may not be familiar with the words. Ask students to try and guess the meaning of the words and to come up with a short story using all of the words.

The point of this activity is not that they use all the words correctly, but that it sparks their interest and shows the teacher what words with which they are familiar and those with which they are not.

Create a short story using the following words. Do not leave out any of the words.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lambing</th>
<th>Saracens</th>
<th>Feudal</th>
<th>Pilgrim</th>
<th>Tanner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crusade</td>
<td>Manor</td>
<td>Mayling</td>
<td>Fallow</td>
<td>Miller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plowboy</td>
<td>Falconer</td>
<td>Sniggler</td>
<td>Apprentice</td>
<td>Villein</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Development**

Plan the Performance Throughout the weeks leading up to the performance

1. Let students know they will be performing a play and that everyone will be assigned a part.

2. Assign parts and have students read their part. The appendix has a chart outlining the characters.

3. Have students read their parts individually and write down any words they do not understand.

4. Go over a time-line for getting ready for the play. The actual performance can be as simple or as elaborate as the teacher sees fit. It can be done at night for the whole school community with costumes and sets, or it can be performed as a reader’s theater just for other classes during the school day. Either way, it will probably take two or three weeks to get ready for the play.

5. Spend 15 minutes each day rehearsing individually with students.


7. Perform the play.

**Differentiation**

1. Students can select a character from the book and write journal entries or drawings from the perspective of their character. Writing journal entries based on the information in the monologues can encourage students to summarize the content of the story. See Appendix.

2. Students can take the journal writing activity a step further by writing entries that place the character before the action written in the book and writing entries that project what happens after. For example, a student can create an entry based on Petronella meeting Jacob Ben Salomon again, but this time in a public market.
Expansion

**Additional activities leading up to the performance**

1. Create poster boards with themes and concepts that are introduced in the book.
   - feudalism
   - trade
   - class division
   - farming
   - apprenticeship
   - medical care
   - religion
   - rules

2. Place these poster boards throughout the classroom and have students add to these boards as they familiarize themselves with their parts and the book itself. Read the six background sections throughout the weeks leading up to the performance to help fill out the poster boards.

Assessment

**Closing Activity & Assessment**

Have students pick a character they would or would not like to change places with. See Appendix. This character should be different from the one they performed. Have the students write a paper that is organized under the following headings:

I. Introduction
   a. Who is the character?
   b. What is their role in medieval society?

II. Changing places with this character:
   a. Why would you or would not like to change places with this character?
   b. Choose some of the poster board themes to add to your discussion.

III. How is the character different and similar to your own life?

Conclusion: What have you learned about life in 1255 England.

**Additional References and Weblinks**


**About the Author**

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**Citation for this Article**

### Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characters</th>
<th>Background of Character</th>
<th>Situation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hugo</td>
<td>The lord’s nephew</td>
<td>Cannot let the lord (his uncle) know that he does not want to hunt and is scared.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taggot</td>
<td>The blacksmith’s daughter</td>
<td>She is told she probably will not marry. She attaches a horseshoe to Hugo’s horse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will</td>
<td>The plowboy</td>
<td>Since his father is dead, he must plow the lord’s land. The strip they were given by the lord for their own use is far away.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>The Shepherdess</td>
<td>She looks after the sheep. Mother died in childbirth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>The doctor’s son</td>
<td>Accompanies his father, the lord’s physician. Learns the tricks of the trade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constance</td>
<td>The pilgrim</td>
<td>Born hunchback and is not accepted. Travels to pilgrimage sites in hopes of a cure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mogg</td>
<td>The villein’s daughter</td>
<td>Her father, a peasant who is not free, died and she must bring the grain to the lord’s mill and no other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Otho</td>
<td>The miller’s son</td>
<td>Disliked because he is the miller’s son. Miller viewed as dishonest in business, and people resent having no choice but to go to them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>The half-wit</td>
<td>Is made fun of, but helps Otho when Otho is attacked by the other children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>The knight’s son</td>
<td>Father was a knight, but they lost their land. Simon wants to be a knight, but because there is no money his only real option is to become a monk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edgar</td>
<td>The falconer’s son</td>
<td>Has stolen and trained a sparrowhawk from Simon’s father’s land. Could face punishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isobel</td>
<td>The lord’s daughter</td>
<td>Is upset that someone threw dung on her dress. She believes it is God’s will that her father rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbary</td>
<td>The mud slinger</td>
<td>Must help her stepmother take care of twins. Jealously leads her to throw dung at Isobel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob Ben</td>
<td>The moneylender’s son</td>
<td>Must wear yellow tag identifying him as a Jew. The Christian children do not interact with him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salomon Petronella</td>
<td>The Merchant’s daughter</td>
<td>She almost throws stones at Jacob because he is a Jew.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowdy</td>
<td>The varlet’s child</td>
<td>She helps her father (a varlet) look after the lord’s animals. She lets Pask stay in a shed and brings him food.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pask</td>
<td>The runaway</td>
<td>His parents (villeins) died so he ran away. If he can live in a town a year and a day he will be free. He wants to learn a trade, but it costs money.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piers</td>
<td>The glassblower’s apprentice</td>
<td>He has talent and if he marries one of the glassblower’s daughters he will inherit the workshop.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariot Maud</td>
<td>The glassblower’s daughters</td>
<td>Mariot would like to marry Piers. Maud does not want to marry Piers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nelly</td>
<td>The sniggler</td>
<td>She helps her family catch eels and frogs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drogo</td>
<td>The tanner’s apprentice</td>
<td>Has a crush on Nelly. Believes that tanning is good work even if it smells.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giles</td>
<td>The beggar</td>
<td>He pretends to be cured of lameness by his father giving him holy water. This is how they make money.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>