

The Giving Tree

By Shel Silverstein

Classroom Favorites

Teacher's Guide by Elanna Grover



A Perma-Bound Production

Note to the Teacher: This guide is not intended to be followed exactly. If you did all of the following activities, both you and your students would be tired of working with this book long before you finished. Instead, you are meant to pick and choose among the suggested activities based on the needs and interests of your particular group. You are encouraged to make adaptations, or to supplement the guide with activities of your own creation.

Even though this book has no page numbers, this guide will refer to certain pages by number. Therefore, you may find it convenient to number the pages in your copy of the book, starting with the page that says "Once there was a tree . . ." as page 1 and ending with the page that says "The End" as page 52.

Objectives

1. To (a) recall details, (b) make interpretations, (c) read critically, and (d) respond creatively to the book
2. To gain awareness of how authors use language to create a specific response on the part of their readers
3. To have opportunities for a variety of writing experiences
4. To respond to the book through the use of art and drama
5. To look at a situation from more than one point of view

Evaluation

Teachers may evaluate students' mastery of the preceding objectives through their response to the Word Study Activities, Discussion Questions, and Activities sections of this guide. Each of the items in these sections has been coded to the objective(s) to which it relates. You will find this coding in parentheses following each item. For example, (Obj. 1c; Obj. 5) would indicate that the preceding teaching suggestion relates to objective 1c and objective 5.

Synopsis

The giving tree loves a little boy who comes every day to gather her leaves, climb her trunk, swing from her branches and eat her apples. But as the boy grows older he comes much less often. He tells the tree that he is too big to climb and play, but what he really wants is some money. The tree gives him her apples to sell in the city. As the years pass, the boy visits the tree occasionally, and each time she gives something to make him happy — her branches to build a house, her trunk to make a boat so he can sail away. Finally the boy comes back as an old man. The tree apologizes that she has nothing left to give

him. The boy replies that all he needs now is a quiet place to sit and rest, and the tree offers her stump for him to sit on.

Criticism

The Giving Tree has received mixed reviews, some praising its warmth and sensitivity, and others criticizing it as a chauvinistic story which holds up an unhealthy relationship as an ideal for children to emulate. Teachers may want to consider these criticisms in planning how they will use the book with children. *The Giving Tree* certainly provides much food for thought and discussion. Because its simple language is paired with a subtle message, it is especially suited for use with several specific types of audiences. Gifted younger readers in grades 1-3 should be able to appreciate its message. It will also appeal to older disabled readers who will find that they can handle the simple text independently, but that it is not a "baby" book. It could even be used very successfully in adult literacy programs.

Biographical Sketch

Shel Silverstein was born in Chicago in 1932. When he was around 12 or 14 he started to draw and write. He didn't have anyone to model his work after, so he had to develop his own style.

Silverstein was in the armed forces and served in Korea and Japan during the 1950s. While he was in the service he was a cartoonist for the *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, a periodical for servicemen.

Shel never intended to write or draw for children. It was his friend, Tomi Ungerer, another children's author/illustrator, who first convinced him that he should try writing a children's book.

The Giving Tree was one of his first books for children. When he first showed it to editor William Cole, it was rejected. Cole felt it wouldn't sell because "it fell between two stools, children and adult." Sales records have certainly proved Cole wrong.

Shel Silverstein divides his time between a houseboat in California; Key West, Florida; and Greenwich Village in New York. He likes being free to pick up and go where he pleases when he pleases, and he is fortunate to have an occupation which allows him to do just that.

In addition to his children's books, Silverstein is a songwriter whose work includes, "A Boy Named Sue" and "The Great Conch Train Robbery". He has also written a one act play and appeared in a motion picture.

Shel Silverstein is a very private person. He will no longer give interviews or appear on television talk shows. He prefers to communicate through his work.

Introductory Activities

1. Read the title and look at the cover of the book together. Have you heard the saying "It is more blessed to give than to receive"? What do you think this saying means? Do you agree with it? Why or why not? (Obj. 5)
2. Have you heard of Shel Silverstein before? Have you read any of his other works? (*Where the Sidewalk Ends*; *A Light in the Attic*) Based on what you know about him, what kind of story do you expect *The Giving Tree* will be? (Obj. 1b)

Word Study

Note to the Teacher: The simplicity of language in this book is one of the things that makes the story so effective. Students who are sophisticated enough to appreciate the message of *The Giving Tree* will most probably have no difficulty with the vocabulary found in the book. Therefore, the word study activities will focus on the way in which the author uses language to communicate his message.

Word Study Activities:

1. Discuss Shel Silverstein's style of writing in this book:
simple vocabulary
short simple sentences
repetition: "And the tree was happy."
How does this style help Silverstein to make his readers respond in the way he wants them to? (Obj. 2)
2. Most of Shel Silverstein's work is rhyming poetry. Why do you think he chose to write this book as a non-rhyming story? Do you think this work should be called a poem, even though it doesn't rhyme? (Obj. 2)
3. Select a portion of the story. Rewrite it using longer, more complicated sentences and a more difficult vocabulary. Which version do you think is more effective, yours or Shel Silverstein's? Why? (Obj. 2)
4. On pages 27 and 28, Shel Silverstein has written only one sentence, but the picture communicates much more information to the reader. What information did you get from the picture that was not in the text? Rewrite this part of the story so that this information is included in the words of the story as well as in the picture. Which version do you prefer, yours or Shel Silverstein's? Why? (Obj. 2)

Discussion Questions

During the Reading:

Note to the Teacher: Most of these questions involve students in making predictions about what might happen next in the story. You may want to have students confirm their predictions after they have read on in the story. Make sure that you convey to students that they are not wrong just because their prediction differs from the author's telling of the story. After considering the needs of the readers in your group, you may decide that this story would be more effective if read in its entirety without interruption for questions or discussion. If so, these questions could be postponed until after the reading is completed, or not used at all.

1. (after p. 28) How do you think the relationship between the tree and the boy will change now? Describe an imaginary conversation between the tree and the boy about this change in their relationship. (Obj. 1b; 1d)

2. (after p. 34) Were you surprised by the way either of the characters acted? How did Shel Silverstein's version compare with your prediction in Question #1? What do you think will happen next in the relationship between the tree and the boy? (Obj. 1a; 1b)
3. (after p. 44) How have your feelings about the tree and the boy changed since the beginning of the story? Do you think there will be any further changes? (Obj. 1b)

After the Reading:

1. Compare and contrast what made the tree happy with what made the boy happy. (Obj. 1c)
2. The boy got all the things that he wanted, but they didn't seem to make him happy for long. What is the best way to find happiness? What advice would you give to the boy to help him find lasting happiness? (Obj. 1c)
3. During what periods of his life did the boy seem happiest? What conclusions can you draw about the reasons the boy was happier during these periods of his life? (Obj. 1b)
4. Look back at the expression "It is more blessed to give than to receive" that you discussed before reading the book. Based on the events in the book, do you think Shel Silverstein agrees or disagrees with this statement? Give examples from the book to support your answer. (Obj. 1b; 1a)
5. What if the tree had tried to change the boy by telling him how she felt when he stayed away so long? How might this have changed the outcome of the story? Do you think it would be as good a story, or a better story if this had happened? Why or why not? (Obj. 1b; 1d)
6. Was the tree foolish to give to the boy? What difference would it have made to the tree if she hadn't offered her apples, branches, and trunk? What difference would it have made to the boy? (Obj. 1b; 1d)
7. What if another boy had come to play with the tree? How could this have changed the outcome of the story? (Obj. 1d)
8. Shel Silverstein chose to make the tree female and the child male. What significance is there in this choice? Do you think women tend to be more giving than men? What if the roles were reversed and the tree was male and the child female? What difference would this make, if any, in the effectiveness of the story? (Obj. 1c)
9. What do you think Shel Silverstein's message was in this story? Did he present his message directly or indirectly? Do you think Shel Silverstein chose the most effective way to present his message? If you had written the story, how might your message have been different from Shel Silverstein's? (Obj. 1c)
10. Shel Silverstein illustrated this story himself. Suppose his publishers had decided to choose someone else to illustrate this book. Look through a number of picture books, and choose the illustrator that you think would have done the best job of illustrating this book. Do you think the publishers made the right choice when they let Silverstein illustrate his own book, or would another style of pictures have been more effective? (Obj. 1c)

Activities

1. Read other works of Shel Silverstein. Compare *The Giving Tree* to his other works. Tell some of the differences and similarities. (Obj. 1c)
2. Retell *The Giving Tree* as a flannelboard story. Make a flannelboard by stretching a piece of felt or flannel around a rectangle of heavy cardboard or thin plywood. Then make figures to stick on the board as you retell the story. These figures can be made of felt or paper with pieces of felt or sandpaper glued to the back. You can also make flannelboard figures from pella, an inexpensive innerfacing material available at any fabric store. If you buy one of the lighter weights of pella, it can be used just like tracing paper to copy figures from the book. The edges will not ravel when it is cut out, and it can be colored with markers. It will stick to the flannelboard just as it is, without any additional backing. (Obj. 4)
3. Retell the story of *The Giving Tree* in the form of a step book. See the directions for making a step book in this guide. Turn the book so that the steps open vertically. Draw the tree over the pages of the step book so that as each page is turned another part of the tree disappears. Write the words on the inside part of the pages. (Obj. 3; Obj. 4)
4. Change the tree to another object and retell the story. Talk about the properties this other object would need to have in order to make the story "work". Brainstorm a list of possible objects. (Obj. 3)
5. The tree has applied for a job as a salesperson, babysitter, secretary, school principal, nurse, loan officer in a bank, or another job of your choice. You have been asked to write a letter of recommendation for the tree. As honestly as you can, describe her good and bad points as they relate to the job for which she has applied. (Obj. 3)
6. Choose one of the following situations to role play:
 - The tree visits a psychiatrist to discuss her relationship with the boy.
 - The boy visits a psychiatrist to discuss his dissatisfaction with his life.
 - The boy and the tree go together for counseling to improve their relationship.
 - The Giving Tree and the Little Red Hen meet for coffee and discuss their problems. (Obj. 4)
7. What questions can you think of that you would like to ask Shel Silverstein about this book? Brainstorm a list of questions together. (Some of the questions I would ask are: Was there a relationship in your own life that motivated you to write this book? What is the significance of the initials Y.L. on the tree? Some people respond to this book with a feeling of warmth and inspiration at such unselfish giving; others are indignant that the tree was treated so unfairly. Which response were you striving for when you wrote the book? Who is Nicki, the person to whom you dedicated the book?) Write a group letter to Shel Silverstein in care of his publisher. (Obj. 1c)
8. Make a giving tree from a tree branch or construction paper. Each time someone in your class does something that exemplifies an unselfish, giving attitude, write the unselfish action on a construction paper leaf and attach that leaf to the tree. (Obj. 4; Obj. 3)
9. Make a read-along tape to go with the book. Choose appropriate background music for your reading. Choose a signal to let readers know it is time to turn the page. Plan for any sound effects that you might want to use. (Obj. 4)
10. Find a poem that goes with the book. Read your poem to the class and tell why you think it goes with the book. (Obj. 1c)
11. Which character in the story did you identify with most? How did the author make you feel this way? Rewrite one part of the story so that readers would identify with a different character. (Obj. 2; Obj. 5)
12. Construct or draw an emblem or symbol that represents the theme of this book. Under the emblem, state the theme as exactly as you can.
13. Do some research about all of the products that come from trees. Make a poster or a chart to show what you have learned. (Obj. 1c; Obj. 4)

Making Connections to Other Books

1. Books about trees:
 - The Story of Johnny Appleseed* by Aliki
 - Johnny Appleseed* by Steven Kellogg
 - Parsley* by Ludwig Bemelmans
 - Yonder* by Tony Johnston
 - The Berenstain Bears and the Spooky Old Tree* by Stan & Jan Berenstain
 - Apple Tree* by Peter Parnall
 - Trees* by Martin Hamer
 - Trees* by Illa Podendorf
 - Trees* by Carolyn Boulton
 - Discover the Trees* by Jerry Cowle
 - The Tree* by Judy Hindley
2. Books about unselfishness and giving vs. selfishness and greed:
 - Tico and the Golden Wings* by Leo Lionni
 - "The Gift of the Magi" by O. Henry
 - The Wave* by Margaret Hodges
 - The Legend of the Bluebonnet* by Tomi de Paola
 - "The Little Mermaid" by Hans Christian Andersen
 - The Little Drummer Boy* by Ezra Jack Keats
 - Peter's Chair* by Ezra Jack Keats
 - The Falling Stars* by Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm, ill. by Eugen Sopko
 - The Ring and the Window Seat* by Amy Hest
 - Miss Rumphius* by Barbara Cooney
 - King Midas and the Golden Touch* retold by Freya Littledale
 - The Little Red Hen* retold by Margot Zemach
 - The Magic Fish* by Freya Littledale
 - The Selfish Giant* by Oscar Wilde
 - Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* by John Steptoe
 - Stone Soup* by Marcia Brown
3. Other Books by Shel Silverstein
 - Where the Sidewalk Ends*
 - A Light in the Attic*
 - The Missing Piece*
 - Lafcadio, the Lion Who Shot Back*
 - A Giraffe and a Half*
 - Who Wants a Cheap Rhinoceros*
 - The Missing Piece Meets the Big O*

HOW TO MAKE A STAIRSTEP BOOK

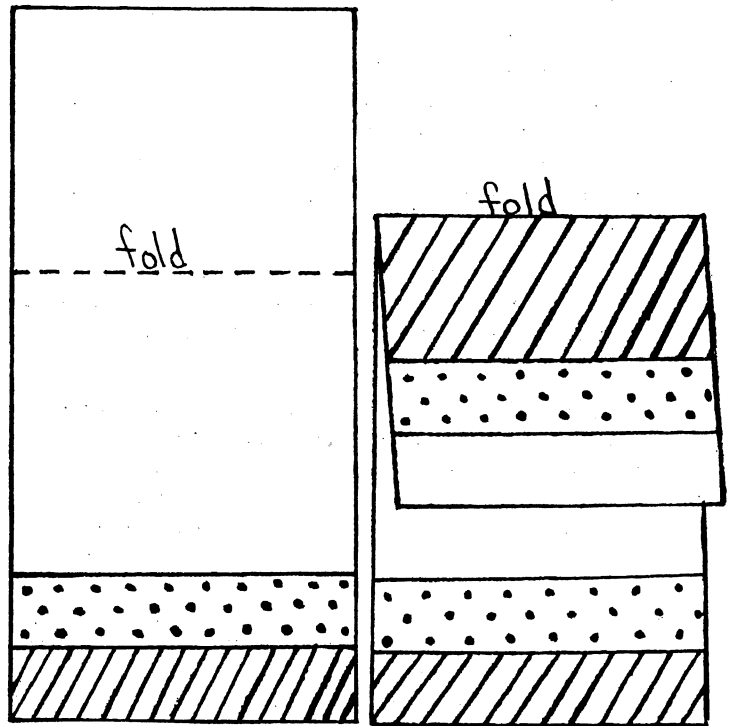
Step 1: Take two or three sheets of paper and align them so that the end of each page extends about one inch beyond the page on top of it. It is not necessary to actually measure each gradation in the pages. Just align the pages so that the gradations look even to the eye.

Step 2: With the pages in the position outlined above, fold the sheets over so that the top edge is about one inch above the bottom of the same page. Staple or sew along the fold to hold the pages together. If you wish, you can add a construction paper, wallpaper, or cloth cover.

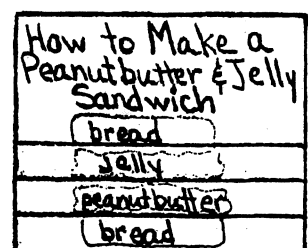
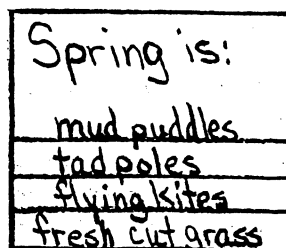
Using two sheets of paper results in a book with four stairstep pages. Using three sheets of paper results in a six-page book, and so forth.

If your students are too young to have the coordination necessary to do the folding themselves, it takes about fifteen minutes to fold and staple books for 25 students. You may want to ask parent volunteers to make several hundred blank step books for use throughout the school year.

The stairstep book can be oriented either horizontally or vertically depending on the subject matter. The text can be written on the front with pictures revealed as the pages are turned, or a picture can be drawn on the front with the text underneath. The examples on the right show several ways that the stairstep book format may be used.



Our Day	At	At	At	At	At	At	At
	9:00 we	10:00 we	11:00 we	12:00 we	1:00 we	2:00 we	3:00 we



Vocabulary Test

Read the sentences below. Read the words below the sentences. Fill in each blank space with a word that makes sense in the sentence.

1. The boy used the leaves of the tree to make a _____ for his head.
2. The boy _____ apples from the tree to sell in the city.
3. The boy liked to _____ from the branches of the tree.
4. The boy liked the climb up the _____ of the tree.
5. The boy liked to sleep in the _____ of the tree.
6. The boy's teeth were too _____ to eat the apples from the tree.
7. The tree gave her _____ so the boy could build a house.
8. At the end of the story a _____ was all that was left of the tree.
9. The boy told the tree he needed a place to sit and _____ quietly.
10. The tree told the boy her house was the _____.

branches
stump
swing
trunk
weak

forest
gathered
crown
shade
rest

Answer Key

Vocabulary Test

1. crown
2. gathered
3. swing
4. trunk
5. shade
6. weak
7. branches
8. stump
9. rest
10. forest

Comprehension Test A

Matching (10 points each)

1. E
2. C
3. B
4. D
5. A
6. D
7. B

Essay Question (30 points)

Answers will vary.

Comprehension Test B

True/False (10 points each)

1. T
2. F
3. F
4. T
5. T
6. F
7. F

Essay Question (30 points)

Answers will vary.



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