

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Twits

by
Roald Dahl

Book Information

Roald Dahl, The Twits
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The misadventures of two terrible old people who enjoy playing nasty tricks and are finally outwitted by a family of monkeys.

Award: Bilby Award; Misc./Other

Topics: Animals, Birds; Animals, Monkeys; Behavior, Misc./Other; Behavior, Revenge; Emotions, Hate; Humor/Funny, Practical Jokes; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 4-6

Main Characters

Fred the gas meter reader, who discovers the Twits are gone

Mr. Twit a sixty-year-old man with a filthy beard; he enjoys tormenting others

Mrs. Twit Mr. Twit's ugly wife, who likes playing tricks on others

Muggle-Wump and his family the Twits' four monkeys, who are determined to stop the Twits from killing birds

the birds the animals that help the monkeys trick the Twits

the four little boys four curious boys who became stuck to Mr. Twit's tree

the Roly-Poly Bird the African bird, who flies to England and helps the monkeys outsmart the Twits

Vocabulary

clambered climbed using both hands and feet

filthy very dirty

giddy dizzy

hoisted raised or lifted up

plotting secretly planning

revolting very disgusting

Synopsis

Mr. Twit is a disagreeable, dirty man who is married to a woman who has made herself ugly by constantly thinking unpleasant thoughts. The two play cruel tricks on each other and do unpleasant things to the people and animals they encounter. For instance, Mrs. Twit has a glass eye that she puts in Mr. Twit's beer. To retaliate, Mr. Twit puts a frog in her bed and, in turn, Mrs. Twit tricks Mr. Twit into eating spaghetti mixed with worms.

After Mr. Twit eats the worm spaghetti, Mr. Twit avenges himself by gradually lengthening Mrs. Twit's cane to make her believe she is suffering from a disease he calls "the dreaded shrinks." He convinces her that the only cure is to stretch her, so she lets him tie her feet to an iron ring and attach sixty balloons to her arms. When she complains that she could easily be lost if the strings around her ankles break, Mr. Twit is inspired to set her adrift. She floats high in the sky while Mr. Twit revels in her absence. She chews through the strings attached to some of the balloons, lands on Mr. Twit, and beats him with her cane.

The Twits' property is unpleasant as well. They live in a house with no windows, and the yard contains a garden of thistles and stinging-nettles, a dead tree, and four unhappy monkeys who are kept locked in a cage. The Twits frequently force the monkeys to stand on their heads to train them for a circus act.

Every Tuesday Mr. Twit smears the dead tree with glue to trap birds for Bird Pie. On one occasion, four curious little boys became stuck in the glue and had to leave their pants behind in order to escape Mr. Twit. The monkeys try to warn the birds about the tree, but the English birds cannot understand the monkeys' African language.

The monkeys' dilemma is solved when the Roly-Poly Bird from Africa lands on their cage. The Roly-Poly Bird knows both the monkeys' language and the language of the English birds, so it translates the monkeys' warning for the birds. The monkeys and

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the Roly-Poly Bird thwart Mr. Twit's efforts for two days, and the birds laugh at Mr. Twit's frustration. Finally, Mr. Twit and his wife leave to buy shotguns to shoot the birds.

While the Twits are gone, the Roly-Poly Bird frees the monkeys. Muggle-Wump, the father monkey, wants to use his freedom to get revenge on the Twits. He directs his wife and two children, the Roly-Poly Bird, and the other birds to work together to glue all of the Twits' living room furniture to the ceiling; then the monkeys return to their cage to wait for the Twits to return.

As the Twits approach, two ravens brush the couple's hair with glue. The Twits enter the house to wash up, but they are confused when they enter the upside-down room. They decide to stand on their hands so they will be "right-side up." When they do, they are permanently glued to the floor. Eventually gravity causes them to "shrink" into themselves until nothing is left but a bundle of clothes. In the meantime, the monkeys leave to build a home in the woods, and the Roly-Poly Bird offers to fly them back to Africa when the weather gets cold.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why is Mr. Twit so determined to kill the birds after they evade his glue traps?

Mr. Twit really loves Bird Pie, and he also seems to like killing small defenseless creatures. He is impatient and greedy and is unwilling to skip his favorite meal. He also is angry because the birds laugh at him. The birds' laughter motivates him to buy a shotgun so he can blast the birds off the roof.

Literary Analysis

How do the house and yard of the Twits reflect their personalities?

Both the Twits and their home are unpleasant. Mrs. Twit keeps a garden of thistles and stinging-nettles just to keep children away from their property. There are no windows on the house because Mr. Twit does not want to be seen by others. They use the dead tree in their yard to catch birds for food, and they mistreat the monkeys they keep locked in a cage in their yard.

Inferential Comprehension

How do the lives of the monkeys change in this story?

At the beginning of the story the monkeys live in a cage and are controlled by the Twits. They cannot go home to Africa, and they have no one to socialize with except each other. They are routinely forced to stand on their heads for hours at a time; they even have to eat in this position. Mrs. Twit often hits them with her cane. The monkeys also have to watch Mr. Twit trap birds once a week. The monkeys constantly try to warn the birds but are unable to communicate with them. They are powerless to help themselves or the birds. By the end of this story, the monkeys are free from the Twits. They live in a nest in a tree, they can make their own choices, and they have many friends, including the Roly-Poly Bird, who offers them the chance to return to Africa.

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Constructing Meaning

How do you feel when Mr. Twit finds the little boys in his tree? Do you believe that Mr. Twit might actually eat them? Why or why not?

Some students may be amused by this anecdote, especially since the boys escape by leaving their pants behind. Others may be frightened or horrified that Mr. Twit is going to hurt the boys. It is difficult to tell whether Mr. Twit might actually eat the boys. He is described as a despicable human being, but most of his mean acts toward humans seem to be cruel jokes, such as making his wife believe she is ill or putting a frog in her bed. While he is physically cruel to the monkeys and the birds, they are animals and he may not subject humans to the same degree of brutality. However, he is willing to jeopardize his wife's life by setting her afloat with the balloons, and the author does seem to suggest that he has no conscience.

The BFG or The Magic Finger. Have them write a paper showing how these stories are similar and how they are different, especially in how good and evil are characterized.

Recognizing Details Mr. and Mrs. Twit die of "the dreaded shrinks," which at first seems to be a fictitious ailment created by Mr. Twit. Have the students create a medical journal entry for this disease using details provided in the story.

Teachable Skills

Responding to Literature The animals get revenge on the Twits rather than try to make peace with them. Conduct a class discussion about negative consequences that can come from seeking revenge. Then ask students to write suggestions about how the animals could have tried to be more constructive in their dealing with the Twits. What practical steps could they have taken to resolve their problem peacefully rather than resorting to retaliation? For example, they could have escaped without seeking revenge, or they could have sought protection from the S.P.C.A. or other animal rights groups.

Extending Meaning The Twits mistreat the monkeys by making them stand on their heads for hours and by keeping them locked in a cramped cage. Have students refer to pet care books and write a short report on the proper care of pet monkeys.

Comparing and Contrasting This story is about a pair of very unpleasant people who are punished for their evil deeds. Have the students read some other books by Roald Dahl such as