Because of Winn-Dixie

by Kate DiCamillo

Because of Winn-Dixie, a big, ugly, happy dog, 10-year-old Opal learns ten things about her long-gone mother. Because of Winn-Dixie, Opal makes friends in her new home town. Because of Winn-Dixie, Opal lets go of the sadness inside.

**THEMES**
pets, love, family, friendship, loss, loneliness, secrets

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**I. PRE-TEACHING**

**A. These terms should be defined and discussed:**
concerned, microscope, memorized, embarrassed, palmetto, mosquitoes, talent, gerbils, irritating, trustworthy, cranky, lightning, pathological, terrorized, guitar, criminal, retarded, ignorant, roundabout, dandelion, dramatic, enlisted, abiding, vermin, typhoid, sensation, lozenges, ingredient, sorrowful, melancholy, disease, dangerous, shimmery, drizzle, myths, constellations

**B. Before beginning the story, discuss the following questions with the class:**

1. Do you have a pet? How did you get your pet? What is special about your pet?
2. Is there an older woman in your town whom kids call a witch? Why are they afraid of her? What would happen if you went to visit her?
3. Do you have friends of different ages? Why or why not?

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**II. PRESENTATION**

**A. Understanding the Story:**

1. Begin with Chapters 1 - 7: Why does Opal claim the dog at the Winn-Dixie is hers? Describe the dog. Why does she call her father “the preacher”? How does he react when he sees Winn-Dixie? What does Opal and Winn-Dixie have in common? What ten things does the preacher tell Opal about her mother? What problems does Winn-Dixie cause? What happens when they tie him outside church? What happens when Opal goes to the library? Who is Opal’s first friend in Naomi?
2. Advance to Chapters 8 - 16: How does Opal get the job at Gertrude’s Pets? What do Dunlap and Stevie tease her about? Why do Dunlap and Stevie warn her about going to Gloria Dump’s house? What does Opal tell Gloria about herself? How does Winn-Dixie act during the thunderstorm? What does the preacher say they have to be careful about? What makes Opal suddenly love the preacher so much? What is Otis doing when Opal gets to Gertrude’s Pets? How does Opal get Otis to calm the animals down? What does Gloria tell her about Dunlap and Stevie? Why does Gloria put bottles on the tree in her yard? What book does Miss Franny suggest Opal check out to read to Gloria? What did Miss Franny’s great-grandfather find when he got home from the war?

3. Complete the story with Chapters 17 - 25: What are the Littmus Lozenges he created like? What is the secret ingredient? What sadness does Opal feel when she tastes one? How does the preacher respond to them? Why is Amanda so sad? Why did Otis go to jail? Why does Opal invite to her party? Why doesn’t Otis want to come? How does she get him to agree? What spoils the party? What important thing did Opal’s mother leave behind? Where has Winn-Dixie been? What does Opal tell Gloria’s bottle tree? How does she feel about her mother’s leaving her now?

**B. For Discussion:**

1. Trace the ways Opal makes friends. Why do people like her? Would you like Opal for a friend? Why or why not?
2. Miss Franny Block tells Opal, “Men and boys always want to fight. They’re always looking for some reason to go to war.” Is this true? Discuss: If men and boys weren’t this way, would there be wars? How would disputes be settled?
3. What do Littmus Lozenges bring out in each character? In what ways does Opal feel life is like a Littmus Lozenge?
4. In what ways does Winn-Dixie help Opal make friends? How does he help her understand her father and deal with her loss of her mother?

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**III. EXTENDING THE LESSON**

Give students the opportunity to work with partners, groups, the whole class, or alone.

**INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS:**

**A. Language Arts:**

1. Have students put together a character list featuring the different traits of the main characters. What qualities in Opal help her make friends? What quality in the preacher makes him a good father?
2. Have students make a list of ten things about someone they know—a family member, a good friend, a pet.
3. Have students write a story about a neighborhood “witch” who turns out to be an ordinary person.
4. When all the animals are loose in the pet store, the author uses strong verbs to describe their movements. Have students listen and write down these verbs. What other verbs for movement can they think of?

5. Have students find a story they could tell to the class and hold a storytelling session. These could be folktales, true stories, or historical events.

6. Have students read the opening chapter of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and compare the setting and the tone with *Because of Winn-Dixie*.

7. Have students learn about the book or watch the movie *Gone with the Wind*. Why do they think Miss Franny suggested Opal read it to Gloria Dump?

**B. Art and Music:**

1. Have students make a bulletin board about the story. Show the sleepy Southern town, the grocery store, the houses where Opal’s friends live, the trailer, the pet store, the church, the thunderstorm, Winn-Dixie, and other characters and events from the story.

2. Have students make a bottle tree like Gloria’s in the yard at school. What could each bottle represent?

3. Have students put different flavors of hard candy in their mouths, close their eyes and get in touch with their moods. Have them use colored pencils or paints to capture these moods.

4. Have students discuss ways they could cheer up a lonely person. They could make cards to send someone would have to do if they worked there. An other group might visit a veterinarian and ask how people respond to love and to abuse?

5. Have students find out about Fort Sumpter. When were dogs first made into pets? What made it easy for early people to domesticate them? What characteristics from the wild do they still demonstrate? What wild animals are they most closely related to?

6. Have students find out about so-called witches in American history. Why did people believe in witches? Why were old women singled out so often? What is a “witch hunt”?

7. Have a group of students select music from the library and compare the setting and tone with *Because of Winn-Dixie*.

**D. Science:**

1. In what ways do dogs or other pets demonstrate that they have been properly cared for? How do they act if they are abused or not loved? In what ways do they demonstrate their need to be loved? Is this behavior similar to how people respond to love and to abuse?

2. Have students listen and write down these verbs. What role did it play in the Civil War?

3. Have students find out about stray dogs and cats. Why is this a problem that some people consider serious? What is being done about it?

4. Have students find out about Fort Sumpter. What role did it play in the Civil War?

5. Have a group of students find out about Fort Sumpter. What role did it play in the Civil War?

**C. Social Studies:**

1. Have students learn about the Civil War. How did it start? Why was it fought?

2. Have students read the book or watch the movie *Gone with the Wind*. Why do you think Miss Franny suggested Opal read it to Gloria Dump? How does this book make them feel about the Civil War? How was it different for Southerners than for Northerners?

3. Have students find out about stray dogs and cats. Why is this a problem that some people consider serious? What is being done about it?

4. Have students find out about so-called witches in American history. Why did people believe in witches? Why were old women singled out so often? What is a “witch hunt”?

5. Have a group of students select music from the library and compare the setting and tone with *Because of Winn-Dixie*.

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