

WAR OF THE SUBURBS



War of the Suburbs

Full Lesson Plan

*A Fantastic Tales short story and complete English lesson plan
courtesy of ManWrites*

Recommended level: B1-B2

Skills: reading, vocabulary, speaking, critical thinking and writing

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Introductory Questions

1. What do you imagine when you hear the title “War of the Suburbs”?
2. Do you believe that life exists on other planets? Why or why not?
3. How might ordinary people react if a spacecraft suddenly appeared above their homes?
4. Can animals sometimes sense danger before humans do? Give an example.
5. What details can a writer use to make an ordinary morning feel unsettling?

War of the Suburbs

“Cup of tea, love?”

Stan stood by the kitchen sink. His wife shuffled in and sat at the table.

“Yes, please,” she whispered.

Stan knew that Margaret needed at least another ten minutes before she fully awoke. This was their usual morning routine and had been for the last thirty-two years. Him stood by the sink, waiting for the kettle to boil, and her sat at the table staring into space.

Bonnie, their pet dog, snapped and barked at Stan’s ankles.

“What’s the matter with you?” said Stan. He turned to his wife.

“Dog’s gone mad.”

“She needs to go outside,” said Margaret, rubbing a hand over her face.

The dog ran to Margaret, put its paws on her knees, and yapped frantically.

“You need to go wee-wees?” said Margaret, leaning down towards the dog.

Stan stared out into the back garden. It was in near-total darkness.

“Bit of a gloomy day,” he said. “Still, it is November.”

Outside, the garden was still. The trees at the back, the well-tended rose bushes — Stan’s pride and joy — and the plants and lawn all shrouded in dark grey.

“Lisa’s coming over today,” said Margaret. “She wants lasagne for lunch. There’s one in the freezer.”

“Oh well,” said Stan. “Lasagne for lunch it is then.”

He didn’t mind. He would eat anything that Lisa wanted. His granddaughter. Seven years old and she could do no wrong.

Bonnie yapped and snarled at Stan’s feet again.

“What’s got into this dog?” he said. “She’s going frantic.”

The kettle whistled as the water boiled and Stan turned off the gas.

“I hope she hasn’t been next door again,” said Margaret. “Maybe she’s had some of the fertilizer like last time.”

Stan poured hot water into the teapot.

“We never really knew if it was the fertilizer,” said Stan. “We just said it might have been.”

Their next-door neighbour had used a new fertilizer on his lawn. Margaret thought that Bonnie had eaten some of it and it had made her ill.

But no one really knew.

Stan put the lid on the teapot. He always gave it two minutes to stew. Then, a proper cup of tea. Just right.

He crouched down to take a closer look at the dog. As he reached out a hand to stroke her head, she cuddled under his arm and whimpered. Her eyes were wide open in fear.

“What’s the matter, girl?” said Stan.

“Can you hear that?” said Margaret.

Stan stood upright and peered out into the garden again. Why was it so dark?

It was nearly seven. The days were shorter in November, but it shouldn’t be this dark.

“There it is again,” said Margaret. She stared down the hallway to the front door. “Stan?”

Stan could hear it too now. Voices coming from outside.

“There’s something going on outside,” he said. “I’ll just take a quick look.”

“Mind the dog, Stan,” said Margaret. “Don’t let her out.”

He went to the front door and opened it. Outside was like the middle of the night. In the small drive of their house, their neighbour stood, dressed in his underwear and a pair of slippers.

“I can’t believe it,” he said. “I just can’t believe it.”

Stan stared back at him. He looked comical standing there in his shorts and vest. The slippers on his feet were for a woman. His wife’s slippers.

“Bob?” said Stan. “What’s going on?”

Bob the neighbour shook his head and gave Stan a grin. “I can’t believe it. It’s — It’s just incredible.”

Over the road, Stan saw the woman who lived in the house opposite. They didn’t speak that often, just said hello, and that was about it. In her arms was her daughter. The girl had her arms wrapped around her mother’s waist, holding her tight.

Bonnie barked and whimpered behind him.

Margaret called out to him. “Stan? What is it?”

Other neighbours were in the street. All dressed in their pyjamas or in their underwear, all staring up at the sky. A car had stopped in the

middle of the road. The driver stood by his car and gazed up above his head.

Stan tilted his head and looked above.

Then he saw it.

A huge expanse of metal. A great network of shining steel where the sky should be. It covered the entire space above their heads. A spaceship, bigger than the entire road, larger than anything in the whole town.

A stream of small lights flickered and raced from one end to the other.

"I can't believe it," said Bob the neighbour. He let out a laugh, like a child. "I just can't believe it."

"Stan, what is it?" Margaret called out from behind him. "What's going on?"

The edges of the spaceship veered off into the far distance. Just outside the perimeter of the spaceship, Stan could make out a strip of early morning sunlight.

"Margaret," he said. "I think you might want to take a look at this."

Reading Comprehension Questions

Answer the questions in complete sentences. Model answers appear at the end of the lesson plan.

1. Who are the two main characters in the story?
2. Where are they?
3. What time is it?
4. Where is Stan at the beginning of the story?
5. What does Stan offer Margaret?
6. How long have Stan and Margaret followed the same morning routine?
7. What does Margaret usually need before she is fully awake?
8. Who is Bonnie?
9. How is Bonnie behaving?
10. What does Margaret think Bonnie needs to do?
11. Why does Stan describe the day as gloomy?
12. Which parts of the garden can Stan see?
13. Who is coming to visit Stan and Margaret?
14. What will they eat for lunch?
15. How does Stan feel about Lisa?
16. What does Margaret think Bonnie may have eaten previously?

17. Do Stan and Margaret know for certain what made Bonnie ill?
18. How does Bonnie react when Stan tries to stroke her?
19. What does Margaret hear?
20. Why does Stan think the darkness is unusual?
21. What does Stan decide to do?
22. What warning does Margaret give Stan?
23. Who does Stan see outside?
24. What is Bob wearing when Stan opens the door?
25. Why does Bob look comical?
26. How does Bob react to what he has seen?
27. Who is standing outside the house opposite?
28. How is the little girl reacting?
29. What are the other neighbours doing?
30. Why has a car stopped in the middle of the road?
31. What does Stan finally see when he looks up?
32. How large is the object above the street?
33. What is moving across the surface of the spaceship?
34. How far do the edges of the spaceship extend?
35. What can Stan see just beyond its perimeter?
36. Has the spaceship made any obvious noise?
37. How does the spacecraft explain the darkness?
38. What does Stan ask Margaret to do?

39. How does Stan's calm language contrast with the extraordinary situation?

40. What question is left unanswered at the end of the story?

War of the Suburbs — Story and Reading Comprehension Questions

The story below is divided into six sections. Each section is followed by reading comprehension questions. The wording of the original story is unchanged.

Section 1

“Cup of tea, love?”

Stan stood by the kitchen sink. His wife shuffled in and sat at the table.

“Yes, please,” she whispered.

Stan knew that Margaret needed at least another ten minutes before she fully awoke. This was their usual morning routine and had been for the last thirty-two years. Him stood by the sink, waiting for the kettle to boil, and her sat at the table staring into space.

Bonnie, their pet dog, snapped and barked at Stan’s ankles.

“What’s the matter with you?” said Stan. He turned to his wife.

“Dog’s gone mad.”

“She needs to go outside,” said Margaret, rubbing a hand over her face.

The dog ran to Margaret, put its paws on her knees, and yapped frantically.

“You need to go wee-wees?” said Margaret, leaning down towards the dog.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Who are the two main characters in the story?
2. Where are they?
3. What time is it?
4. Where is Stan at the beginning of the story?
5. What does Stan offer Margaret?
6. How long have Stan and Margaret followed the same morning routine?
7. What does Margaret usually need before she is fully awake?
8. Who is Bonnie?
9. How is Bonnie behaving?
10. What does Margaret think Bonnie needs to do?

Section 2

Stan stared out into the back garden. It was in near-total darkness.

“Bit of a gloomy day,” he said. “Still, it is November.”

Outside, the garden was still. The trees at the back, the well-tended rose bushes — Stan’s pride and joy — and the plants and lawn all shrouded in dark grey.

“Lisa’s coming over today,” said Margaret. “She wants lasagne for lunch. There’s one in the freezer.”

“Oh well,” said Stan. “Lasagne for lunch it is then.”

He didn’t mind. He would eat anything that Lisa wanted. His granddaughter. Seven years old and she could do no wrong.

Bonnie yapped and snarled at Stan’s feet again.

“What’s got into this dog?” he said. “She’s going frantic.”

The kettle whistled as the water boiled and Stan turned off the gas.

Reading Comprehension Questions

11. Why does Stan describe the day as gloomy?
12. Which parts of the garden can Stan see?
13. Who is coming to visit Stan and Margaret?
14. What will they eat for lunch?
15. How does Stan feel about Lisa?

Section 3

“I hope she hasn’t been next door again,” said Margaret. “Maybe she’s had some of the fertilizer like last time.”

Stan poured hot water into the teapot.

“We never really knew if it was the fertilizer,” said Stan. “We just said it might have been.”

Their next-door neighbour had used a new fertilizer on his lawn.

Margaret thought that Bonnie had eaten some of it and it had made her ill.

But no one really knew.

Stan put the lid on the teapot. He always gave it two minutes to stew. Then, a proper cup of tea. Just right.

He crouched down to take a closer look at the dog. As he reached out a hand to stroke her head, she cuddled under his arm and whimpered. Her eyes were wide open in fear.

“What’s the matter, girl?” said Stan.

“Can you hear that?” said Margaret.

Reading Comprehension Questions

16. What does Margaret think Bonnie may have eaten previously?

17. Do Stan and Margaret know for certain what made Bonnie ill?

18. How does Bonnie react when Stan tries to stroke her?

19. What does Margaret hear?

Section 4

Stan stood upright and peered out into the garden again. Why was it so dark?

It was nearly seven. The days were shorter in November, but it shouldn't be this dark.

"There it is again," said Margaret. She stared down the hallway to the front door. "Stan?"

Stan could hear it too now. Voices coming from outside.

"There's something going on outside," he said. "I'll just take a quick look."

"Mind the dog, Stan," said Margaret. "Don't let her out."

He went to the front door and opened it. Outside was like the middle of the night. In the small drive of their house, their neighbour stood, dressed in his underwear and a pair of slippers.

"I can't believe it," he said. "I just can't believe it."

Reading Comprehension Questions

20. Why does Stan think the darkness is unusual?

21. What does Stan decide to do?
22. What warning does Margaret give Stan?
23. Who does Stan see outside?
24. What is Bob wearing when Stan opens the door?

Section 5

Stan stared back at him. He looked comical standing there in his shorts and vest. The slippers on his feet were for a woman. His wife's slippers.

"Bob?" said Stan. "What's going on?"

Bob the neighbour shook his head and gave Stan a grin. "I can't believe it. It's — It's just incredible."

Over the road, Stan saw the woman who lived in the house opposite. They didn't speak that often, just said hello, and that was about it. In her arms was her daughter. The girl had her arms wrapped around her mother's waist, holding her tight.

Bonnie barked and whimpered behind him.

Margaret called out to him. "Stan? What is it?"

Other neighbours were in the street. All dressed in their pyjamas or in their underwear, all staring up at the sky. A car had stopped in the

middle of the road. The driver stood by his car and gazed up above his head.

Stan tilted his head and looked above.

Reading Comprehension Questions

25. Why does Bob look comical?

26. How does Bob react to what he has seen?

27. Who is standing outside the house opposite?

28. How is the little girl reacting?

29. What are the other neighbours doing?

30. Why has a car stopped in the middle of the road?

Section 6

Then he saw it.

A huge expanse of metal. A great network of shining steel where the sky should be. It covered the entire space above their heads. A spaceship, bigger than the entire road, larger than anything in the whole town.

A stream of small lights flickered and raced from one end to the other.

“I can’t believe it,” said Bob the neighbour. He let out a laugh, like a child. “I just can’t believe it.”

“Stan, what is it?” Margaret called out from behind him. “What’s going on?”

The edges of the spaceship veered off into the far distance. Just outside the perimeter of the spaceship, Stan could make out a strip of early morning sunlight.

“Margaret,” he said. “I think you might want to take a look at this.”

Reading Comprehension Questions

31. What does Stan finally see when he looks up?
32. How large is the object above the street?
33. What is moving across the surface of the spaceship?
34. How far do the edges of the spaceship extend?
35. What can Stan see just beyond its perimeter?
36. Has the spaceship made any obvious noise?
37. How does the spacecraft explain the darkness?
38. What does Stan ask Margaret to do?
39. How does Stan’s calm language contrast with the extraordinary situation?
40. What question is left unanswered at the end of the story?

Essential Vocabulary

Study the words and phrases from the story. Check any unfamiliar meanings, then write an original sentence using each item.

cup of tea	shuffle	whispered
awoke	routine	ankles
frantically	gloomy	well-tended
pride and joy	shrouded	lasagne
freezer	snarled	kettle
fertilizer	teapot	stew
cuddled	whimpered	peered
hallway	drive	comical
vest	pyjamas	gazed
expanse	shining	flickered
incredible	perimeter	make out
curiosity	atmosphere	suspense

Vocabulary Practice Exercise

Match each word from the story with the correct meaning. Write the letter next to the number.

Word Box: *routine, frantically, gloomy, well-tended, pride and joy, shrouded, snarled, whimpered, peered, comical, expanse, perimeter*

1. routine
2. frantically
3. gloomy
4. well-tended
5. pride and joy
6. shrouded
7. snarled
8. whimpered
9. peered
10. comical
11. expanse
12. perimeter

Meanings

- a. made a quiet, weak sound because of fear or pain
- b. carefully looked after
- c. a very large, open area or surface
- d. something done regularly in the same way
- e. the outer edge or boundary of an area
- f. covered or hidden by something
- g. in a hurried, frightened or uncontrolled way
- h. funny, especially because something looks unusual
- i. something that gives a person great pleasure and satisfaction
- j. looked carefully because something was difficult to see
- k. made a low, threatening sound
- l. dark, dull or depressing

True or False

Decide whether each statement is true or false. If a statement is false, correct it so that it becomes true.

1. Stan is making tea at the beginning of the story.
2. Margaret is immediately wide awake when she enters the kitchen.
3. Stan and Margaret have followed the same routine for thirty-two years.
4. Bonnie is calm and sleepy.
5. The story takes place in November.
6. Lisa is Stan and Margaret's granddaughter.
7. Margaret is certain that fertilizer made Bonnie ill previously.
8. The morning is darker than it should be.
9. Bob is fully dressed when Stan opens the front door.
10. A huge spaceship is covering the sky above the neighbourhood.
11. The neighbours run away as soon as they see the spaceship.
12. Stan asks Margaret to come and look outside.

What is the Correct Synonym?

Match each word from the story with the word or phrase that has the closest meaning.

Word Box: *whole, flashed, area, astonishing, amusing, looked closely, cried softly, sick, desperately, dark*

1. gloomy = _____

2. frantically = _____

3. ill = _____

4. whimpered = _____

5. peered = _____

6. comical = _____

7. incredible = _____

8. expanse = _____

9. flickered = _____

10. entire = _____

What is the Correct Antonym?

Match each word with the word that has the opposite meaning.

Word Box: *extraordinary, noisy, unfriendly, late, large, narrow, inside, moving, longer, light*

1. darkness ↔ _____

2. shorter ↔ _____

3. still ↔ _____

4. outside ↔ _____

5. wide ↔ _____

6. small ↔ _____

7. early ↔ _____

8. friendly ↔ _____

9. quiet ↔ _____

10. ordinary ↔ _____

Words and Meanings

Match each expression from the story with its correct meaning.

Word Box: *staring into space, pride and joy, what's got into this dog?, take a closer look, in the middle of the night, make out, do no wrong, gone mad, take a quick look, practically*

1. manage to see or recognise something with difficulty:

2. something a person is extremely proud of:

3. started behaving in a wild or irrational way:

4. examine something more carefully: _____

5. looking ahead without paying attention to anything:

6. almost, although not completely: _____

7. why is this dog behaving so strangely?: _____

8. look at something briefly: _____

9. be regarded so fondly that every action is forgiven:

10. at a very late and dark time of night: _____

Gap Fill Exercise

Complete each sentence with the correct word from the Word Box.
Use every word once.

Word Box: *routine, frantically, gloomy, lasagne, fertilizer, whimpered, peered, comical, expanse, perimeter, flickered, incredible*

1. Every morning, Mia follows the same _____ before leaving for work.
2. The child searched _____ for the missing dog.
3. Heavy clouds made the afternoon seem cold and _____.
4. We took a homemade _____ out of the oven for lunch.
5. The gardener added _____ to help the plants grow.
6. The frightened puppy _____ when it heard the thunder.
7. Amir _____ through the window because it was difficult to see outside.
8. His enormous slippers made him look slightly _____.
9. A wide _____ of water stretched towards the horizon.
10. Security guards walked around the _____ of the building.
11. The lights _____ for a moment during the storm.
12. The view from the mountain was absolutely _____.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe Stan and Margaret's life before the spaceship appears?
2. What does their morning routine reveal about their relationship?
3. Why is Bonnie important to the way tension develops in the story?
4. Why might an animal react to the spacecraft before the people do?
5. How does the darkness change the mood of the opening scene?
6. Which ordinary domestic details make the extraordinary event more effective?
7. Why does Bob laugh rather than show fear?
8. How do the different neighbours respond to the spacecraft?
9. Why does Stan remain so calm when he finally sees the spaceship?
10. What effect does the line "I think you might want to take a look at this" create?
11. Why do you think the spacecraft arrived without waking anyone?
12. What might the title "War of the Suburbs" suggest about what happens next?
13. Do you think the visitors are likely to be friendly or hostile? Explain your answer.
14. How might the authorities respond to an event of this scale?

15. What would you do first if an enormous spacecraft appeared above your home?
16. Why are stories about aliens and first contact so popular?
17. Could intelligent alien life be completely different from anything humans imagine?
18. Would proof of alien life unite humanity or create greater conflict?
19. Which detail in the story creates the strongest sense of suspense?
20. What do you think Margaret will say when she reaches the front door?

Role Play: The Morning the Sky Disappeared

This is a role play activity.

Characters

1. Stan
2. Margaret
3. Bob
4. A neighbour from across the road

The Situation

Margaret joins Stan outside and sees the spacecraft. Bob is excited, while the neighbour from across the road is frightened and wants everyone to go indoors. The four characters must decide what to do next.

In groups of four, create a conversation in which the characters:

- describe what they can see and hear;
- express different reactions to the spacecraft;
- disagree about whether to remain outside;
- decide whether to contact the police or emergency services;
- agree on one immediate course of action.

Use some lines from the story where appropriate, but add your own dialogue. Rehearse the scene and then perform it for the class.

Debate: Would Contact with Aliens Benefit Humanity?

The Motion

“This house believes that contact with intelligent alien life would benefit humanity.”

Option A — Full Two-Team Debate

Divide the class into two teams.

Team A — For the Motion

Argue that contact could expand human knowledge, lead to scientific advances, encourage global cooperation and help humanity understand its place in the universe.

Team B — Against the Motion

Argue that contact could expose humanity to danger, disease, exploitation, panic or conflict and that humans may be unable to understand the visitors' intentions.

Preparation (10 minutes)

- What could humans learn from a more advanced civilisation?
- What risks might come with first contact?
- Would governments cooperate or compete?

- Should humanity attempt to communicate first?

The Debate

1. Team A gives an opening statement (2 minutes).
2. Team B gives an opening statement (2 minutes).
3. Each team responds to the opposing arguments (2 minutes each).
4. The teams answer questions from the class.
5. Each team gives a closing statement (1 minute).

Option B — Simplified Class Discussion

If a full debate is unsuitable, discuss the motion as a class. Ask each student to state whether they agree or disagree and support their view with at least one reason.

Writing

Continue the story from the moment Margaret reaches the front door.

Think about the following questions:

- How does Margaret react when she sees the spacecraft?
- Does anything emerge from the ship?
- What happens to the neighbours?
- Do the authorities arrive?
- Are the visitors friendly, hostile or impossible to understand?
- How will the ordinary suburban morning change?

Write at least 500 words. Try to maintain the contrast between ordinary domestic life and the extraordinary event above the neighbourhood.

When you have finished, read your story aloud to the class or give it to your teacher for review.

Reading Comprehension Questions — Answers

1. The two main characters are Stan and Margaret.
2. They are at home, in their kitchen.
3. It is nearly seven o'clock in the morning.
4. Stan is standing by the kitchen sink.
5. He offers her a cup of tea.
6. They have followed it for thirty-two years.
7. She needs at least another ten minutes.
8. Bonnie is their pet dog.
9. She is snapping, barking and acting frantically.
10. Margaret thinks Bonnie needs to go outside.
11. The garden is still in near-total darkness, although it is nearly seven o'clock.
12. He can see the trees, rose bushes, plants and lawn.
13. Their seven-year-old granddaughter, Lisa, is coming to visit.
14. They will eat lasagne.
15. He adores her and believes she can do no wrong.
16. She thinks Bonnie may have eaten fertilizer from next door.
17. No. They only said that the fertilizer might have caused it.
18. She cuddles under his arm and whimpers in fear.

19. She hears voices outside.

20. It is nearly seven; although November days are shorter, it should not be so dark.

21. He decides to take a quick look outside.

22. She warns him not to let Bonnie out.

23. He sees his neighbour Bob.

24. Bob is wearing underwear and a pair of slippers.

25. The slippers are women's slippers belonging to his wife.

26. He grins, laughs and repeatedly says that he cannot believe it.

27. A woman and her daughter are standing outside.

28. She has her arms wrapped tightly around her mother's waist.

29. They are standing in the street and staring up at the sky.

30. The driver has stopped to get out and look above his head.

31. He sees a vast metal spaceship above the street.

32. It is bigger than the entire road and larger than anything in the town.

33. A stream of small lights flickers and races across it.

34. They extend far into the distance.

35. He can see a strip of early morning sunlight.

36. No obvious noise from the spaceship is described.

37. The enormous spacecraft is blocking the morning light.

38. He asks her to come and take a look.

39. His understatement makes the scene darkly humorous and emphasises his calm personality.

40. The story does not reveal who or what is inside the spacecraft or what will happen next.

True or False — Answers

1. True.
2. False. Margaret needs at least another ten minutes before she is fully awake.
3. True.
4. False. Bonnie is barking, snapping, yapping and behaving frantically.
5. True.
6. True.
7. False. Margaret suspects the fertilizer, but no one knows for certain.
8. True.
9. False. Bob is wearing his underwear and his wife's slippers.
10. True.
11. False. They remain in the street and stare at it.
12. True.

What is the Correct Synonym? — Answers

1. gloomy = dark
2. frantically = desperately
3. ill = sick
4. whimpered = cried softly
5. peered = looked closely
6. comical = amusing
7. incredible = astonishing
8. expanse = area
9. flickered = flashed
10. entire = whole

What is the Correct Antonym? — Answers

1. darkness ↔ light
2. shorter ↔ longer
3. still ↔ moving
4. outside ↔ inside
5. wide ↔ narrow
6. small ↔ large
7. early ↔ late
8. friendly ↔ unfriendly
9. quiet ↔ noisy
10. ordinary ↔ extraordinary

Words and Meanings — Answers

1. make out = manage to see or recognise something with difficulty
2. pride and joy = something a person is extremely proud of
3. gone mad = started behaving in a wild or irrational way
4. take a closer look = examine something more carefully
5. staring into space = looking ahead without paying attention to anything
6. practically = almost, although not completely
7. what's got into this dog? = why is this dog behaving so strangely?
8. take a quick look = look at something briefly
9. do no wrong = be regarded so fondly that every action is forgiven
10. in the middle of the night = at a very late and dark time of night

Gap Fill Exercise — Answers

1. routine
2. frantically
3. gloomy
4. lasagne
5. fertilizer
6. whimpered
7. peered
8. comical
9. expanse
10. perimeter
11. flickered
12. incredible

Vocabulary Practice Exercise — Answers

1. d (something done regularly in the same way)
2. g (in a hurried, frightened or uncontrolled way)
3. l (dark, dull or depressing)
4. b (carefully looked after)
5. i (something that gives a person great pleasure and satisfaction)
6. f (covered or hidden by something)
7. k (made a low, threatening sound)
8. a (made a quiet, weak sound because of fear or pain)
9. j (looked carefully because something was difficult to see)
10. h (funny, especially because something looks unusual)
11. c (a very large, open area or surface)
12. e (the outer edge or boundary of an area)

Credits

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