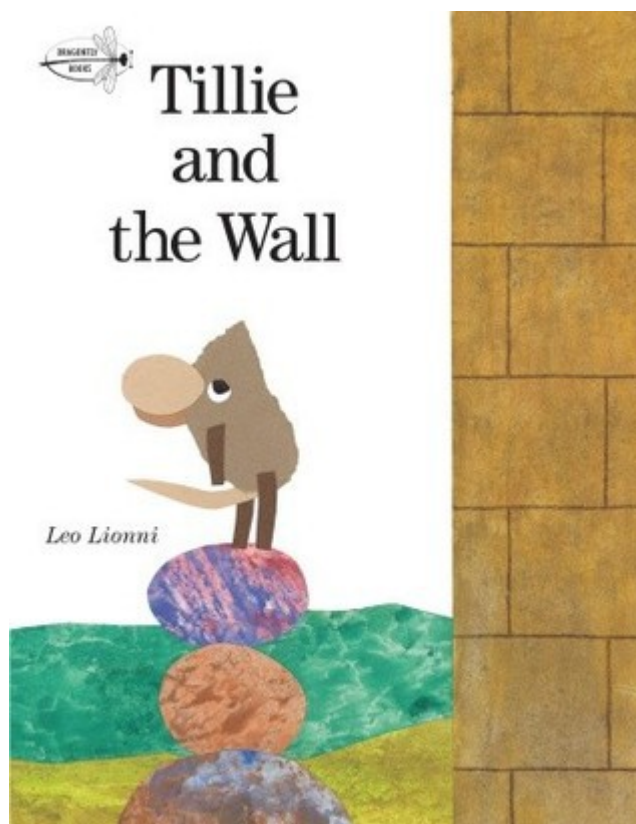


Literature Guide for Leo Lionni's

Tillie and the Wall



*by Robin M. Huntley*

## Summary

One of beloved author and illustrator Leo Lionni's lesser known works, Tillie and the Wall tells a fantastically symbolic tale of a young mouse and the power of curiosity. Told through somewhat simplistic text, the story is accessible to young readers yet includes deep symbolism that older readers can engage with. Lionni's classic style of illustration (a mixture of cut paper, collage, and traditional hand-drawn images) echoes both the story's simplicity and below-the-surface complexity, and the book's images add additional layers to the embedded symbolism.

In the story, a young mouse named Tillie lives alongside a small community of mice in a habitat that is bordered on one side by an enormous wall. The wall is so large that none of the mice can see over it or climb it, and none of them can seem to find its end. Long ago, the mice wondered what was on the other side of the wall. However, once they discovered that they couldn't find out, they stopped wondering. The mice learned to accept the wall as part of their surroundings, and though they couldn't explain it, they felt no need to discuss it. All of them, that is, except for Tillie.

Being a young mouse, Tillie is fascinated with the wall – her fascination driven by curiosity. She imagines all manner of strange plants and beasts inhabiting the lands on the other side of the wall, and even rallies a group of young mice to re-attempt the search to get around the wall. The youngsters try climbing the wall and ramming the wall with a nail (remember, they are mice after all!), both to no avail. Finally, Tillie experiences a stroke of genius. Earthworms, she observes, tunnel beneath the earth's surface. Couldn't she, then, tunnel underneath the wall and discover the other side?

Tillie digs and digs, and eventually finds herself on the other side. Much to her surprise, the inhabitants of the other side are neither fantastic beasts nor exotic plants: they're mice, too! The two mouse communities are overjoyed at Tillie's discovery and, after much celebration, the tunnel is left open, allowing the mice to move freely from one side to another, joining their two communities together.

## **Critical Thinking Questions**

Intended for use with readers ages 9-11, these questions are designed to support readers in deepening their understanding of the story. Questions for this particular story are specifically designed to help readers find the deeper meaning hidden within the text. Such questions call for readers to compare the story to their own lives, and encourage them to search for a morale, as well. The Critical Thinking Questions will be most effective when utilized after the story has already been read.

Questions do not need to be used in the order that they are listed.

- What do you think the significance/symbolism of the wall is? Why?
- The mice in Tillie's community have stopped being curious about the wall because they've simply gotten used to it. Are there any things in your own life that you treat this way?
- Why do you think that the mice in Tillie's community have stopped being curious about the wall?
- Where do you think Tillie's imaginary vision of what the other side of the wall would be like came from? What could her inspiration have been?
- How does this story spotlight the power of observation?
- Once Tillie has dug the tunnel, the mice realize that they should link their communities. What do you think the tunnel link could symbolize?

## **Mini-Lesson**

Crafted with 5<sup>th</sup> grade students (ages 10 and 11) in mind, this mini-lesson is designed to support readers in developing an understanding of perspective. While the lesson links to the story and builds upon the ideas presented within it, it is not centered around the story itself. Readers will be asked to exercise skills for listening and critical thinking, and will be exploring the breaking down of metaphorical walls in their own lives. This lesson can be done with any group of readers, but is most

effective with a group of readers who know each other fairly well.

*Tunneling Beneath the Wall: A Lesson in Perspective*

1. Explain to readers that they'll be using the ideas included in Tillie and the Wall to spark discussion with one another, the goal of which is to break down any “walls” that exist between them. Let readers know that they'll be working with a partner to try to identify the “wall” between them and to work on ways to tunnel beneath it.
2. In order to support students in playing a role in choosing their own partners, allow them a few minutes to reflect on their own personality, work habits, interests, and opinions. Share aloud your own thoughts about yourself as an example for how to approach this thinking task. Ask students to briefly share their thoughts after they have had some time to think.
3. After students have heard each others' assessments of themselves, ask them to privately make a list of 2-3 people in the group who they feel are unlike themselves. These lists should be shared with the facilitator so that pairings can be made. (Steps 2 and 3 could take place a few days in advance so that pairings are already set before the lesson begins.)
4. Partner readers with another member of the group who they are quite different from. Readers' opinions should be taken into account, but may not always inform decisions. Students should work in groups of 2.
5. Ask readers to spend 10 minutes working with their partner: each reader will talk about themselves for 5 minutes. If they aren't able to share much about themselves, their partner may ask questions to solicit further information. Readers' goal during these conversations should be to uncover ways in which they are not like their partner. The ways in which they are not similar serve as Tillie's wall: the barrier that prevents the pair from being truly connected.
6. After conversations have taken place, ask each pair to share a few things that they gleaned from their conversation. In what ways are they different? How do they differ in opinion and/or

interests? How are their lives unlike each others?

7. Allow pairs another 10 minutes of discussion time, this time with the goal being to find common interests, experiences, etc. Ask them to find as many commonalities as possible.
8. Explain to readers that the similarities that they were able to find are like Tillie's tunnel: the path allowing two disconnected places to be connected to each other. Ask pairs to share the things that they discovered as their “tunnel.”
9. (Optional) Process the activity by having pairs create visual representations of their discovery. Pre-made templates including a wall with a tunnel underneath could be useful, as readers could write and draw about their differences on either side of the wall, and could them work to fill the tunnel with words and images representing their similarities.

### **Extension Activities**

Created with readers ages 9-11 in mind, these extension activities support readers in using the story as an entry point into a wide variety of studies. Loosely written so as to be easy to adapt, these activities could be used with a much wider age range and could be adapted for inclusion within many different units of study.

#### *The Power of Cooperation*

In the story, cooperation doesn't solve Tillie's problem: close observation does. However, in real life, it is often the combination of the two that truly solves problems. Explore the relationship between the two things by challenging readers to a cooperative activity. Tasks that involve moving a group across a designated area without quite the right tools in order to do so encourage the use of cooperation and close observation. Whatever task is used, be sure to process the activity after and link the use of cooperation and observation back to the story.

### *The Art of Leo Lionni*

Leo Lionni is one of the most beloved children's authors/illustrators of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Explore his work by reading a variety of his books, and challenge readers to notice, in particular, the way in which his stories are illustrated. Note the use of a variety of materials and the inclusion of numerous artistic styles within each story. Explore these techniques and media by creating illustrations of your own, either mimicking scenes from a true Lionni story or illustrating an original story of your own.

### *Cultural Explorations*

Much as the mini-lesson relates similarities and differences between peers to the tunnel and the wall in the story, studies of world cultures can follow a similar structure. Explore cultures in the world that, at first glance, appear to be drastically different from your own. Then, search for similarities. This task can be quite difficult, depending on the chosen culture, but all cultures share some similarities – readers will need to dig deep in order to find them. Learning could be tracked in a Venn diagram, or something more closely resembling a wall with a tunnel underneath it. For older readers, this activity could present a way to build connections to cultures that mainstream media presents as a threat to our own, allowing readers the opportunity to learn for themselves the ways in which all humans are innately similar.