

When We Care for the Earth, The Earth Cares for Us

Exploring Reciprocity and Responsibility through Story

Kayla Maas, Cass Lake-Bena Middle School, Cass Lake, MN, USA

Abstract

This five-day unit is designed to help students see the important connection between people and the Earth. The idea that when we care for the planet, it, in turn, cares for us. Using *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein and *The Apple Tree* by Sandy Tharp-Thee, students explore how our choices affect the world around us and the ways that giving and receiving can exist in balance. We start the week by building background knowledge about how the Earth provides for us every day with clean air, water, food, and beauty, and our responsibility to care for it in return. Students analyze the two stories: *The Giving Tree* shows what happens when we only take, while *The Apple Tree* demonstrates what happens when we nurture and care for something over time. Through discussion, journaling, and reflection, students begin to see themselves as part of a circle of care, capable of making small actions that truly matter.

Keywords

Sustainability, reciprocity, trees, close reading, compare and contrast

Overview

The unit uses *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein and *The Apple Tree* by Sandy Tharp-Thee as anchor texts for comparing relationships between humans and nature. Students begin by activating background knowledge about how the Earth provides for us and how our choices impact the environment. Through close reading, text comparison, discussion, and written reflection, students analyze themes of reciprocity and responsibility.

The unit concludes with students demonstrating understanding by expressing appreciation and outlining specific actions they can take to care for the planet with a class Earth Pledge. This unit integrates reading, writing, and reflection while supporting Minnesota 7th grade ELA standards

7th Grade Minnesota ELA Standards Addressed

- **7.1.2.2** – Determine the theme of a text and analyze its development; provide an objective summary.
- **7.1.3.3** – Analyze how elements of a story interact (like how setting shapes characters or plot).
- **7.1.7.7** – Compare and contrast a text with another in terms of theme, approach, or topic.
- **7.6.2.2** – Write informative/explanatory texts that examine a topic and convey ideas clearly.
- **7.9.1.1** – Draw evidence from texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Narrative Framing

The Giving Tree introduces the idea of imbalance. In this story, the boy continually takes from the tree until she has nothing left to give. It mirrors how humans sometimes use Earth's resources without thinking about giving back. Later, *The Apple Tree* by Sandy Tharp-Thee offers a contrasting example. Where the boy cares for the tree, nurturing it from seed to maturity. This second story invites students to imagine what a balanced, respectful relationship with nature can look like.

As the unit unfolds, students move from awareness to reflection. They discuss, write, and make personal connections to how their choices affect the world around them. By the end of the week, they will make a personal promise to care for the earth. The narrative framing centers on a simple but powerful message: When we care for the Earth, the Earth cares for us.

At a Glance

Title	When We Care for the Earth, The Earth Cares for Us
Unit Time	42 minute class period x1 67 minute class period x4
Grade Level(s)	7th grade ELA
Core Text	<i>The Giving Tree</i> by Shel Silverstein <i>The Apple Tree</i> by Sandy Thrap-Thee
Climate Literacy Terms	Reciprocity – The idea of mutual exchange or balance; when humans care for the Earth, the Earth provides care and resources in return. Sustainability – Using resources in a way that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs.
Objectives	• Understand the concept of reciprocity and how it relates to the relationship between humans and the Earth. • Identify and explain the central themes in <i>The Giving Tree</i> and <i>The Apple Tree</i>. • Recognize the consequences of taking from nature without giving back. • Analyze how characters' actions and choices affect both people and the environment. • Cite textual evidence to support ideas during discussions and written responses. • Express understanding through reflective and creative writing that demonstrates personal connection and accountability.
Materials and Resources	Climate Lit Unit Climate Lit Unit Materials Day 1 Climate Lit Unit Materials Day 2 Climate Lit Unit Materials Day 3 Climate Lit Unit Materials Day 4

Going Forward

My hope is that students leave this unit thinking differently about their relationship with the Earth. Too often, environmental topics can feel overwhelming or make students feel like there is nothing they can do to make a difference. This unit intentionally focuses on the opposite message: small actions matter.

Through reading, discussion, and reflection, students explore the idea that caring for the Earth is not about being perfect. It is about recognizing that we are part of a relationship. The Earth provides us with clean water, food, air, beauty, and places to gather and play. In return, we have a responsibility to care for it in ways both big and small.

The Earth Pledge created at the end of the unit is meant to help students identify realistic actions they can take in their own lives. Whether that means picking up litter, planting something, conserving resources, spending more time outdoors, or encouraging others to care for the environment, each action contributes to a larger culture of stewardship and respect.

As students continue beyond this lesson, I hope they carry with them the understanding that caring for the Earth is not a one-time project or assignment. It is an ongoing practice of gratitude, responsibility, and reciprocity. When we care for the Earth, the Earth cares for us. By helping students see themselves as capable of making a difference, we empower them to become thoughtful community members and future leaders who understand that even small acts of care can create meaningful change.

References

- Silverstein, S. (1964). *The giving tree*. Harper & Row.
- Tharp-Thee, S. (2017). *The apple tree*. RoadRunner Press.
- TED-Ed. (2016, November 29). What is sustainability? [Video]. YouTube.
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