

The Big Dreams of Small Creatures

Gail Lerner

Name: _____

Class: _____



1. If a creature frightens us, does that mean it wants to hurt us?

2. As you read, note one event for each character that shows how they respond to insects.

Eden

August

One Place, Different Goals

3. Compare Eden’s and August’s journeys. Use details from the novel to complete each box.

	Eden	August
Why They Go to the Institute		
A Step Toward Their Goal		
An Outcome That Affects Someone Else		

4. August looks for Milton because he wants to get rid of insects. Why does the purpose of the Institute Milton founded conflict with August’s goal?

Are insects really to blame?

What Happens on Stage

A cockroach crawls into August's costume. Panicking, he pulls off his jacket and shirt, knocking over the scenery. Laughter fills the room, and Sheila makes fun of him. August blames the cockroach for all of his embarrassment.

5. a. In this scene, identify one result of the insect's movement and another result of people's choices.

Result of the Insect's Movement

Result of People's Choices

b. Does this event give us enough reason to say the insect meant to embarrass August? Why or why not?

c. August avoids Vincent because he is afraid of being mocked too. What effect does this choice have on Vincent's loneliness?

Acting or lying?

6. Think about these two ways August uses his acting skills.

In the Play

August plays Papa Bear in the school show. The audience knows they are watching a play.

At the Institute

August introduces himself as an adult and an insect doctor. He wants Eden to believe he is a real doctor.

a. How does the difference in what people know change the meaning of August's behavior?

b. Why does August's claim to be a doctor put the injured Dot at risk?

7. How could August use his acting skills at the Institute without deceiving anyone? Give a specific suggestion.

Rescue and Trust

Queen Mote's Decision

When Queen Mote sees Eden trying to rescue August, she decides that Eden is an enemy too. Atom asks his mother for time to hear Eden out. In the end, the ants save both children.

8. a. What does Queen Mote overlook when she judges Eden? Use something Eden did earlier in the story.

b. The ants rescue August. Once the danger has passed, however, Tillie and Atom ask him to leave the Institute. Do these decisions contradict each other? Explain.

9. Would saying “I’ve changed” be enough for August to return? Describe one action that could show he has changed, and explain why.

A Living Raft

What happens when a flood fills an ant nest with water? Some fire ants link their bodies to form a living raft that floats on the surface. This behavior is more than a storybook idea.

In a study published in 2011, Nathan Mlot, Craig Tovey, and David Hu observed fire ants of the species *Solenopsis invicta* in a laboratory. They recorded how the ants joined together when placed on water. The ants gripped one another with their feet and jaws, forming a broad structure.

The ants' water-repellent outer surfaces and the air trapped between them helped the structure float. Some ants formed the base of the raft while others stayed on top. The colony could remain together on the water.

The study examined one ant species under laboratory conditions. It did not show that all ants behave this way or that an ant raft could carry people.

Written for this booklet using the research of Mlot, Tovey, and Hu (2011).

10. Draw a side view of the ant raft. Show how the ants hold on to one another, where the water is, and where air is trapped. Use arrows and brief notes to explain how these features help the raft float.

Fact and Fiction

The Raft in the Novel

During the flood, Eden and August stay afloat on a raft made from the ants’ bodies.

11. Compare the rescue scene in the novel with “A Living Raft.”

	In the Study	In the Novel
Who Forms the Raft		
Who Rides on Top		

12. A student says, “If ants can form a raft, they can carry two children, just as they do in the novel.” What is missing from this reasoning? Rewrite the claim so it stays within what the study actually shows.

Butterflies and Poppies



Vincent van Gogh · Butterflies and Poppies · 1889

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Image: Wikimedia Commons · Public domain

13. What catches your eye first: the butterflies or the flowers? Explain why, using two details about color and shape.

A Small Creature's Impact

In the Painting

14. a. Imagine the butterflies were removed from the painting. How would the mood of the picture and your response to it change? Use one visual detail to explain.

In the Novel

b. Choose a moment when a small creature changes the course of events in the novel. Describe what it does, then explain how the event might have turned out without it.

A New Notebook Entry

According to Tillie, Milton never shared his notebook because he was waiting for it to be perfect. At the end of the novel, Eden begins asking questions in a new notebook.



15. Write a new entry for Eden's notebook. Set your scene in the novel's world: a person misunderstands an insect's behavior. Let the entry change as new information comes to light.

First Entry

What does the person notice, and what do they think it means? Write 3-4 sentences.

New Information

Add a detail that reveals what the insect needs. Write 1-2 sentences.

Revised Entry

Correct the first interpretation. Explain what the person will do differently in 2-3 sentences.

Sources

Book

Gail Lerner · The Big Dreams of Small Creatures

Painting

Vincent van Gogh · Butterflies and Poppies · 1889
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)
s0188V1962 · Image: Wikimedia Commons · Public domain / PD-Art

[Image and Rights Record](#)

[Museum Collection Record](#)

Informational Text

Mlot, N. J., Tovey, C. A., & Hu, D. L. (2011). Fire ants self-assemble into waterproof rafts to survive floods. PNAS, 108(19), 7669-7673.
DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1016658108

[Full Research Article](#)

Text and Image Credits

The prompts, scene summaries, informational text, and small illustrations were created for this booklet. The novel's full text and original illustrations are not reproduced. The painting is a public-domain image from Wikimedia Commons, shown in full with its original proportions and colors.

Sources Consulted for Activity Design

IES / WWC (2022) · Providing Reading Interventions for Students in Grades 4-9

Navratil and Kühn (2023) · Learning with self-generated drawings...