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Consider This...

What is it that we first see, when we begin a story? The *title*. Authors give quite a bit of thought to choosing or creating a title. When you have finished reading this story, ask yourself why it is called *The Gold Medal*. What is the significance of the gold medal? Why is it given?

As the story opens, you meet Amanda, a girl who is just about your age. You will follow her through a day that is full of struggles. Amanda seems to resent being challenged to do her best. For her, this means she is not being seen for who she really is—for herself. Why is Amanda, in fact, forced to try harder than other kids her age?

Amanda is a girl of intensity and stamina. In spite of her difficulties and her angry feelings, she seems like a person who won't give up and will work things out. Will she remain angry, or will she translate some of her resentment into accomplishment? Is her anger justified? As you read the story, see if you can see the events from more than one point of view.



Nan Gilbert

The Gold Medal

The day had been too much for Amanda. It had started out bad and got no better, one thing piling on another all day long.

“That skirt is too short,” her mother had frowned during this morning’s last-minute inspection. “Did you scrub your teeth? Are your fingernails clean?”

“Mom, I’m not a *baby!*” Amanda had let out a hopeless squawk and fled. It was no use. When her mother looked at her, she didn’t see Amanda—not really. She saw an Example to help show their new neighbors that the Dawsons were as clean and quiet and well-mannered as any family on the block.

“I’m not an Example!” grumbled Amanda rebelliously.¹ “I’m *me!*”

Amanda Dawson—tall for her years, a little thin, leggy as a newborn colt. Flopping short black ponytail, jutting² elbows, springy knees. Long feet that could trip her up—and frequently did. Face plain and unremarkable except for large, liquid, chocolate-brown eyes, just one shade darker than her scrubbed, shining skin.

What did her mother see, if she didn’t see Amanda? Amanda’s quick imagination leaped to present her with the picture of a Proper Example: a spotlessly clean, tidy creature who kept her elbows in and her knees hidden...whose hair never worked loose from its tight rubberband...

1. *rebelliously* (rih BEL yuss lee): refusing to accept someone’s authority

2. *jutting* (JUTT ing): sticking out

who didn't run or shout or use slang...whose name was always on the honor roll...

"You there—shoo! Don't trespass! Keep to the sidewalk!"

Absorbed³ in her picture-making, Amanda had unthinkingly taken the shortcut across Mrs. Hawthorne's corner lot. Now the old lady had popped from her house like a cuckoo from a clock.

"Oh, woe!" muttered Amanda, retreating quickly. "Here we go again!"

The first time this had happened, Amanda had felt bewildered. The shortcut was worn bare by years of schoolchildren's feet, and others seemed to be using it freely.

"I'm not hurting anything," she had said.

Her protest roused the old lady to a flurry of shrill bird-like cries. "This is private property—I have my rights!"

Now, loping back to the sidewalk, pursued by indignant⁴ chirps, Amanda told herself resignedly,⁵ "Mrs. Hawthorne doesn't see me either." When the old lady looked at Amanda, it was as though she saw not just one girl, but a whole regiment⁶ of Amandas, marching across her lot, crushing flowers and shrubs!

Amanda sighed. How did you make someone really *see* you? So they'd know you were *you*? Not a Regiment. Not an Example.

Not a Gang of Hoodlums, either! That's what Mr. Grogan always saw when he looked at her, Amanda decided. By the time Amanda entered Mr. Grogan's store to buy a candy bar, her imagination was growing livelier by the minute.

Mr. Grogan was all smiles and jokes—"Well, well, what's it going to be this time? A nice big box of chocolates, maybe?" he asked.

But he watched Amanda carefully as she lingered over the candy display. When she brought her purchase to the counter, he made an

3. *absorbed* (uhb ZORBD): engrossed; completely involved in

4. *indignant* (in DIG nunt): displeased by something considered unjust or insulting

5. *resignedly* (ree ZYN ud lee): giving up and accepting something one doesn't really want to accept

6. *regiment* (REJ ih ment): a unit of soldiers or a group of people who have all been taught to behave the same way

excuse to peek into her lunch sack—“My, my, won’t get any fatter on a diet like that!”

No need to look—I didn’t steal anything! For a second, Amanda was afraid she had said the words out loud. Mom would split a seam if she even suspected Amanda of speaking up like that, pert⁷ and sassy! Hastily, Amanda grabbed her sack and ducked out of the store. Until she had her imagination under control, she’d better keep a close guard on her tongue!

Head down, Amanda scuffed slowly toward school. The day had hardly begun and already it rested heavily on her shoulders. Nor did she expect anything inside the walls of Jefferson School to lighten the load.

School was Amanda’s greatest trial this fall. Instead of a familiar building filled with old friends, her family’s move to a new home had made Amanda a stranger among strangers. As yet she had made no real friends to replace those she had lost. Though some of the girls were cordial⁸ and kind, nobody asked her home after school or stopped at Amanda’s house for cookies and pop. And she knew there were others—or maybe it was their parents—who didn’t like her being at Jefferson at all. This thought added to the day’s accumulating⁹ weight of gloom.

During the noon break, Amanda avoided the lunchroom. She took her sack-lunch outside to a sheltered corner of the building. For some reason, today the sunny nook seemed lonely. Each bite Amanda swallowed had to fight its way past a great lump that unexpectedly blocked her throat.

When the bell summoned her back to class, Amanda reluctantly joined the hurrying, chattering crowds in the hall. Her next class was science, taught by Mr. Moore. Amanda thought Mr. Moore the nicest of all the teachers; for him she tried extra hard to do good work. Her first lonely, awkward day in Jefferson, Mr. Moore had welcomed her with genuine warmth. And he was always generous with after-school time, ready to help her if there was something she didn’t understand.

7. *pert* (PURT): bold and impertinent; slightly disrespectful

8. *cordial* (KOR juh1): friendly and courteous

9. *accumulating* (uh KYOO myuh LAY ting): mounting; growing

But now, slumped low in her backrow seat, with the lump still big in her throat and a growing heaviness in her heart, Amanda thought, “He doesn’t see me either. He’d treat *any* black kid the same way.” Because he’s kindhearted. Because he truly wants to help a black child fit into a white world. For him, she was the symbol of a cause he believed in. She wasn’t herself at all.

Mr. Moore had to call her name twice before she realized he had asked her a question. Amanda stared at him somberly.¹⁰

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Oh, come now, Amanda, of course you do. Remember, it’s what we talked about yesterday—”

“I don’t know!” The lump in Amanda’s throat broke suddenly into a loud, dismaying¹¹ sob. “Why is it so awful if *I* don’t know? Lots of times *they* don’t know, and you never look so—so—” It was Mr. Moore’s look of hurt surprise that sent her dashing out of the room, that and the new and louder sob rising in her throat.

From the doorway she turned to face him. “I don’t care—it’s true!—I’ve got as much right to be st-stupid as anybody!” The second sob got away from her before she could slam the door. Humiliated, she pelted¹² down the hall and out of the building.

The day was too lovely for gloom—an Indian summer afternoon, with rich golden warmth spread over the fields and hills like eiderdown¹³ quilt. In spite of herself, her bowed shoulders lifted, her heart lightened...

And she began to run. Running, to Amanda, was like flying. There was special joy in the clean rush of air against her upraised face, the pounding blood in her veins. When Amanda ran, she left all her coltish awkwardness behind. Her stride lengthened; her arms pumped; her long feet—that could trip her up when she walked—barely skimmed the ground.

Down the road she flew, and across a pasture where horses pricked their ears at her in mild amazement. She had to stop for breath— panting, laughing, giddy with this supercharge of oxygen—then she was off again.

10. *somberly* (SAHM bur lee): seriously and gloomily

11. *dismaying* (diss MAY ing): causing agitation and unhappiness

12. *pelted* (PELT ed): rushed

13. *eiderdown* (I dur down): soft duck feathers

Up and over a gentle slope where a giant cottonwood¹⁴ offered an oasis of cool green shade she flew.

Too late Amanda saw the high heap of overturned earth below the tree. The springs in her tiring legs coiled and propelled her upward. Arms and legs stretched wide in a split. Thin body bent flat over her forward knee, Amanda cleared the pile of dirt—

But not the excavation¹⁵ behind it. Arms flailing, legs treading the air, she lunged¹⁶ for the far side, then fell back ingloriously¹⁷ into the hole.

“You hurt?” a voice asked with quavery¹⁸ concern.

Amanda sat up, dazed, and brushed dirt from her hands and skirt. Her startled brown eyes, almost level with the rim of hollowed-out earth, saw for the first time the bent figure of an old man under the tree.

“N-no,” she said.

“That was mighty pretty running,” the old man said with approval, “and as nice a hurdle¹⁹ as ever I’ve seen. I’m glad you didn’t hurt yourself.” After a moment, he added, “That’s a grave you’re settin’ in.”

Amanda squeaked and scrambled out onto the grass. “A—a *grave*?”

“Yep, for Chief. Chief’s my dog.”

“Oh—” Amanda cast about for words. “I—I’m sorry he’s dead.”

“He isn’t. Not yet anyway.” The old man struggled to his feet. He leaned heavily on his spade as he surveyed his handiwork. “Just about ready. Yep, a few more days and it’ll be done. Wouldn’t want anyone else to dig it—not for Chief. But if I was to do it, I figured I’d better get started. Can’t turn more’n a few spadefuls a day.”

Amanda looked at the excavation over which the old man was now pulling a piece of tarpaulin.²⁰ “He—must be a big dog.”

“He’s that, all right. Used to be, anyway.” The old man weighted the tarpaulin with a rock at each corner, then straightened slowly. “Kinda thin

14. *cottonwood* (KAHT un wood): a type of poplar tree that has cottony tufts on the seeds

15. *excavation* (EX kuh VAY shun): a hole that has been made by digging

16. *lunged* (LUNJD): moved forward suddenly

17. *ingloriously* (in GLOR ee us lee): simply and looking a bit foolish

18. *quavery* (KWAY vuh ree): shaky

19. *hurdle* (HUR dl): a leap

20. *tarpaulin* (TAR puh lin): a sheet of waterproof canvas

now, poor old boy. You want to come meet him? Chief was a runner, too, in his day—and his day lasted a lot longer than most.”

Taking her consent for granted, he started down the other side of the slope toward a small house almost hidden behind a tangle of vines and shrubbery. Amanda looked a little wildly toward town, but an emotion much stronger than her alarm tugged her in the opposite direction. A runner, the old man had said—just like that. Here was someone who had looked at her and seen—not a Black Child or an Example or a Black Regiment, but Amanda herself—a runner. Wordless with upswelling gratitude, she followed the old man through a door. When Amanda’s eyes adjusted to the dim light inside, she made out the form of a big black dog sprawled near the window in a dappling²¹ of green-filtered sunlight. Except for a single thump of tail, he didn’t move. The old man stooped low, patted the black head and scratched gently behind long velvety ears.

Cautiously, Amanda went nearer. She didn’t know much about dogs; she was uncertain how to treat one that seemed so barely alive. “Is he—uh—pretty old?”

“Sixteen,” the old man said. “Yep, that’s pretty old for a dog. ‘Specially a hunter like Chief...we’ve had some high times together, haven’t we, old boy?”

The tail thumped once again. Amanda knelt gingerly²² and stroked the black coat; it was silky soft, but there seemed nothing between it and the bones beneath. To cover her dismay, she said hurriedly, “I guess a dog is a pretty good friend, isn’t he?”

“The right kind of dog—yep, no better.”

“You mean, like a hunter maybe?”

The old man snorted. “Breed’s the least of it! Line up a hundred Labradors²³ and, chances are, you wouldn’t find another like Chief. Wasn’t another in his own litter like him. I know—I had the pick of the litter.”

Grunting a little with the effort, he straightened and moved to a chair by an ancient roll-top desk. “My friend couldn’t figure why I took the pup

21. *dappling* (DAP ling): a sprinkling of spots

22. *gingerly* (JIN jer lee): delicately, with care and caution

23. *labradors* (LAB ruh dorz): a breed of dog

I did. ‘Sam,’ he says, ‘that’s the runt of the lot! Look here—see how lively this one is!’ But I held to my choice—yes siree, I knew I had a winner.”

“How?” asked Amanda, fascinated.

“By the look in his eyes. There he sat, all paws and floppy head, as forlorn²⁴ a pup as you’d see by any ash can, but those eyes were watching me. ‘Believe in me,’ they said, ‘and I can do anything.’ ” The old man laughed. “Guess you think I’m a little foolish—well, maybe so. But I wasn’t wrong about Chief, no sir! This proves it.”

The old desk creaked as he rolled up the cover. In every pigeonhole²⁵ within there was a ribbon—red ribbons, blue ribbons, purple ribbons, and a single gold medal. “Won ‘em all, Chief did,” the old man said proudly. He touched one after another. “Best working dog...best in class...best of show...”

Out of curiosity, Amanda reached for the gold medal. “Why, it’s a *runner’s* medal!” she cried.

The old man took the medal from her and studied it fondly. “Yep, this was his first—bought it myself. Chief cried his heart out that day, wanted to do miracles for me but he just didn’t have the know-how yet. ‘Never you mind,’ I told him. ‘I know you’re a champion.’ Next time I went to town, I bought him a medal to wear till he’d proved himself to everyone else.”

As if he had followed their conversation, the black dog thumped his tail once more, and fleetingly raised his head. The old man nodded. “Yep, you’re right, Chief. You showed ‘em. Don’t need this one anymore.”

Unexpectedly, he extended it to Amanda. “*You* wear it, Sis. You got the look—just like Chief had. Wear it till you win your own.”

Amanda gulped. She sniffed back tears and had to rub her nose childishly. “They look at me—” she sobbed, “but they don’t *see* me!”

“You see yourself, don’t you?” the old man asked mildly. “Well, then, what more do you need? A dream, and the ambition to work for it—enough for anybody.” Gently he closed her fingers over the medal.

24. *forlorn* (for LORN): feeling lost and sad

25. *pigeonhole* (PIJ un hole): a small compartment in a desk used for storing letters, papers, or other small items

Thinking It Over

1. Amanda exclaims, “Mom, I’m not a *baby!*” What is Amanda really trying to tell her mother?
2. Amanda is attending a new school this fall. She does not yet have any close friends. How does that feel?
3. You have been told to behave well, because you represent a particular group, or because your parents want people to think well of your family. How does it feel? (Write your answer in the first person and the present tense. It should be at least a paragraph of several sentences.)
4. Amanda feels that no one knows her. Look up the word *know* in the dictionary. What does it mean, to be known? In your life, who really knows who you are?
5. What does the old man think is the solution to Amanda’s despair?



Educator's Guide

Consider This...

The Gold Medal is the story of a girl, seemingly on the threshold of adolescence, who is struggling with hurt feelings and the desire that others should see her for who she is. When her mother admonishes her as the story opens, Amanda hears criticisms that might be directed at a younger child. She feels her mother cannot see her.

The theme of Amanda's not being seen is interwoven with all of her interactions with others, as she moves through her day. Then she meets an old man who is digging a grave for his dying dog.

The old man can see her. In the final paragraph, he urges, "You see yourself, don't you?", and so makes the point that Amanda doesn't see herself, either. All along, Amanda has been objectifying herself: She has been seeing herself through the eyes of others, who themselves are unable to see her.

The old man both chides and encourages her. With the words, "Well, then, what more do you need? A dream, and the ambition to work for it—enough for anybody," he closes her fingers around a gold medal. He gives her the medal both for what she is, and what she can become.

Thinking It Over

There are many right answers to each of the questions. But you can help your students by guiding them towards some of the principles that underlie the questions.

1. Amanda exclaims, “Mom, I’m not a baby!” What is Amanda really trying to tell her mother?

Amanda wants her mother to *see* who she is. She wants her mother to have faith that she knows how to take care of herself hygienically. Obviously, she also wants her mom to approve of her choices—as with the length of her skirt. It is likely that because her mom is so anxious that her daughter do the right things and make a good appearance, she is a little too critical—and Amanda is met with a barrage of comments that may feel like an attack. She wants to be nurtured, not verbally assaulted.

2. Amanda is attending a new school this fall. She does not yet have any close friends. How does that feel?

If you have students who have never moved to a new neighborhood nor attended a new school, see if you can help them imagine this: They are now at a new school where they have no friends. Moreover they are racially, ethnically, and religiously different from all of the other students at the school.

3. You have been told to behave well, because you represent a particular group, or because your parents want people to think well

of your family. How does it feel? (Write your answer in the first person and the present tense. It should be at least a paragraph of several sentences.)

Make sure students use the present tense and the first person perspective. Give them an example, for instance, “I feel like everyone is looking at me and I hate being here.” In other words, students’ narratives should read as though the events are taking place right now. This should help students who have never had such an experience and are trying to imagine it.

4. Amanda feels that no one knows her. Look up the word *know* in the dictionary. What does it mean, to be known? In your life, who really knows who you are?

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary has this to say: to *know* is to apprehend immediately with the mind or with the senses, to perceive directly; to have direct, unambiguous cognition of; to recognize the quality of; see clearly the character of; discern.

The answer to the second question is one that most people feel strongly about. A parent, a sibling, or a close friend will often be named as “the only person who really knows me...” That ability to “know us” is something we cherish in a friend more than almost any other attribute. You might discuss (a) what it means to “know” someone and (b) why most people want so much to have someone who “really knows” them. [Then again, there are the few “private people” who spend their lives trying to remain unknown to everyone.]

5. What does the old man think is the solution to Amanda’s despair?

He says that she should wear the gold medal, because she’s got the look of a winner. It is as if he is saying, *Don’t you see what you are?* He is telling her that she needs to *see herself*—no matter whether others can see her for who she is. He adds that what she needs is a dream and the ambition to work for it. It follows—although he does not say it—that *that* is what will carry her through the times when her identity is mistaken by others.



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