

The Body Snatcher- Victorian London

Pre-Show Activity

Objectives

- Students will investigate the challenges and breakthroughs of Victorian medicine through role-play, research, and creative problem solving
- Students will deepen their understanding of the play's historical context and ethical dilemmas.

NOTE: This activity has been aligned with TEKS and [Universal Design for Learning](#). TEKS can be found at the end of this document.

Materials Needed

- Alley Resourced guide for *The Body Snatcher*
- Research and Debate Sheets (attached)
- Access to internet/research tools

Introduction

- With the Alley Resourced guide, found [here](#), introduce students to *The Body Snatcher*.
 - Use the *When and Where* and *Good to Know* sections to familiarize students with the world of the play.
- Four key points of the play will be addressed in this activity:
 - Medical schools' desperate need for cadavers and the job of the resurrection men
 - The primitive and risky nature of 19th-century surgery
 - The emerging understanding of hygiene and antiseptic procedures
 - Key medical history moments

Expert Groups

- Divide the class into four groups (depending on the size of your class, you may want to adjust).
- Each group will have one of the key points as their research topic. (Research guides and rubrics have been attached to the activity.)
 - Resurrection Men & Medical Supply
 - 19th Century Surgery
 - Hygiene & Antiseptic Advanced
 - Medical History & Innovation
- Groups will present their findings to the class in a debate format. (Suggest that students present in character and maintain their character throughout.)

Notes for UDL alignment: To provide multiple ways of expressing understanding, consider letting students act or physicalize their responses. You can also utilize Think-Pair-Share to provide additional solo and partner processing time.

Debate

- Groups will present both a pro and a con side of their argument.
 - Depending on the size and number of groups, you can adjust the format of your debate. If you have multiple groups assigned to one topic, have one group be 'pro' and the other be 'con.' Larger groups can divide themselves. Students can also act as expert witnesses, doctors, patients, etc. (Encourage them to get creative!)
- Non-presenting groups will act as the audience for the debate and will vote on the most successful argument for each topic.

Reflection

- After all groups have presented, lead a class discussion or have students answer the following as a written prompt:
 - How do these historical realities deepen your understanding of the play's characters and conflicts?
 - What modern parallels do you see in medical ethics and progress?
 - How do you think Victorian doctors balanced hope, risk, and humanity?

Notes for UDL alignment: Encourage students to share in pairs, small groups, or through written reflection to offer varied ways of participating.

TEKS

Fine Arts- Theatre, Middle School

4(A) demonstrate the role of theatre as a reflection of history, society, and culture through participation in dramatic activities.

Fine Arts- Theatre, High School Level I-IV

5(A) analyze and apply appropriate behavior at various types of live performances;

English Language Arts and Reading, Middle School

6(I) reflect on and adjust responses as new evidence is presented.

(12) Inquiry and research: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts. The student engages in both short-term and sustained recursive inquiry processes for a variety of purposes.

English Language Arts and Reading, High School- English I-IV

(1) Developing and sustaining foundational language skills: listening, speaking, discussion, and thinking-oral language. The student develops oral language through listening, speaking, and discussion.

11(F) synthesize information from a variety of sources.

11 (I) use an appropriate mode of delivery, whether written, oral, or multimodal, to present results.

Social Studies, Middle School

Grade 6- 18 (A) identify examples of scientific discoveries, technological innovations, and scientists and inventors that have shaped the world

Grade 7- 19(A) compare types and uses of technology, past and present

Grade 8- 28 (A) compare the effects of scientific discoveries and technological innovations that have influenced daily life in different periods in U.S. history

World History Studies, High School

27(D) explain the role of telecommunication technology, computer technology, transportation technology, and medical advancements in developing the modern global economy and society; 27(E) identify the contributions of significant scientists and inventors such as Marie Curie, Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Louis Pasteur, and James Watt.

The Body Snatcher- Victorian Medicine

Your Task: You will research a key aspect of Victorian medicine as it relates to *The Body Snatcher* and participate in a class debate on important ethical questions of the time.

Topic Options & Positions

1. Resurrection Men: Necessary Evil or Criminal Outlaws?
2. Risky Surgery Without Modern Anesthesia: Brave or Inhumane?
3. Hygiene Protocols: Essential or Overbearing?
4. Medical Experimentation: Innovation or Recklessness?

Step 1: Research Your Topic

Use the provided research sheet to gather facts, historical background, and key arguments about your topic. Take notes on:

- Important people, events, or inventions
- Challenges faced by doctors, patients, or society
- Ethical issues raised
- How the play reflects these themes

Step 2: Prepare for Debate

You will be assigned a debate topic and must:

- Develop 3 strong arguments supporting your position
- Anticipate possible opposing arguments
- Prepare questions to ask other teams
- Use evidence from your research and the play

Step 3: Participate in the Debate

During the debate:

- Speak clearly and respectfully
- Present your arguments confidently
- Listen carefully to others and respond thoughtfully
- Support your points with facts and examples

Tips for Success

- Remember the Victorian context—what was known or unknown then?
- Think about how these issues affect real people, then and now

Scoring Rubric

Criteria	Excellent (4)	Good (3)	Fair (2)	Needs Improvement (1)
Research & Evidence	Uses detailed facts from research and play; highly relevant and accurate	Uses good facts and some play references; mostly accurate	Basic facts with limited references or some errors	Lacks facts or inaccurate information
Argument Quality	Arguments are clear, logical, and well supported	Arguments mostly clear and supported	Arguments somewhat unclear or weakly supported	Arguments unclear or unsupported
Rebuttal & Questions	Effectively anticipates and counters opposing views; asks thoughtful questions	Responds to opposing views with some success; asks questions	Limited rebuttal; questions not fully relevant	No rebuttal or questions
Communication	Speaks clearly and confidently; excellent eye contact and engagement	Speaks clearly most of the time; good engagement	Sometimes unclear or hesitant; limited engagement	Hard to understand; little or no engagement
Teamwork & Respect	Works well with team; listens and respects others	Generally cooperative and respectful	Some difficulty working with team or respecting others	Little cooperation or respect shown

Total ____/20

The Body Snatcher- Victorian Medicine: Research & Debate Topic 1

Research: Resurrection Men & Medical Supply

Background:

- The Anatomy Act 1832 limited legal cadavers to unclaimed bodies, causing shortages.
- Resurrection men (body snatchers) illegally exhumed recently buried bodies to supply medical schools.
- Grave robbing was feared and condemned but seen by some as necessary for medical progress.
- The play's character Fettes is a resurrection man, showing the grim realities and moral ambiguity.

Key Questions:

1. Why did medical schools rely on resurrection men?
2. What risks and dangers did resurrection men face?
3. How did society react to grave robbing and body snatching?
4. What laws were introduced to control or stop resurrection men?
5. What is the difference between grave robbing and body snatching?

Potential Sources to Explore:

- Anatomy Act 1832
- Newspaper excerpts on resurrection men (try to find primary sources)
- Case studies of famous resurrection men or Burke and Hare murders

Debate: Resurrection Men — Necessary Evil or Criminal Outlaws?

Pro (Necessary Evil- Medical Progress):

“Without resurrection men, medical schools would have been unable to train surgeons or advance anatomy, costing countless lives.”

Con (Criminal Outlaws- Moral Outrage):

“Grave robbing violates human dignity and causes immense pain to families; it cannot be justified regardless of medical needs.”

Questions:

Could legal reforms have prevented body snatching? How do we balance scientific progress with ethics?

The Body Snatcher- Victorian Medicine: Research & Debate Topic 2

Research: 19th Century Surgery

Background:

- Surgery was dangerous with high mortality rates.
- Anesthesia was in early stages; antiseptics largely unknown or ignored.
- Surgeons like Robert Liston were famous for speed to reduce patient pain and death.
- The play's Dr. Noakes and students reflect these challenges and hopes for progress.

Key Questions:

1. What were common surgical procedures and their risks?
2. How long did operations take?
3. Who were pioneering surgeons and what were their contributions?
4. How did lack of anesthesia and antiseptics affect outcomes?
5. How did society view doctors, medicine, and surgery?

Potential Sources to Explore:

- History of anesthesia and antisepsis
- Biographies of Robert Liston and other Victorian surgeons
- Excerpts from Dr. Noakes' lectures in the play, or other medical lectures/papers of the time

Debate: The Ethics of Risky Surgery

Pro (Risks must be undertaken to advance):

"Given the lack of alternatives, surgeons had to perform risky operations to save lives and push medicine forward."

Con (We should only do what is safe):

"Performing surgery without proper pain relief or hygiene was inhumane and often caused more harm than good."

Questions:

Should surgeons have waited for better technology or done their best with what they had? How does this compare to modern medical ethics?

The Body Snatcher- Victorian Medicine: Research & Debate Topic 3

Research: Hygiene & Antiseptic Advances

Background:

- Ignaz Semmelweis showed handwashing drastically reduced infections but was ridiculed.
- Germ theory was emerging but not yet widely accepted.
- Poor hygiene was a major cause of death in hospitals.
- The play references hygiene protocols and resistance among medical students.

Key Questions:

1. What hygiene practices were introduced in Victorian hospitals?
2. Why was there resistance to antiseptic techniques?
3. How did hygiene improve patient survival?
4. What was the impact of Semmelweis' findings?
5. When did handwashing and other hygienic practices become the norm rather than the exception?

Potential Sources to Explore:

- Biography of Ignaz Semmelweis
- Overview of germ theory development
- Hygiene posters or protocols from the 19th century

Debate: Hygiene Protocols — Revolutionary Necessity or Overbearing Burden?

Pro (We should do everything we can to keep patients safe):

“Strict hygiene and antiseptic procedures are essential to save lives and must be adopted despite resistance.”

Con (How dare you suggest we aren't taking care of our patients):

“At the time, hygiene protocols were inconvenient and poorly understood, leading to skepticism among medical staff.”

Questions:

How did fear and tradition hinder progress? What lessons can modern medicine learn from this?

The Body Snatcher- Victorian Medicine: Research & Debate Topic 4

Research: Medical History & Innovation

Background:

- Advances in medical knowledge through anatomy, physiology, and surgery.
- Early organ transplants and electrotherapy experiments are mentioned in the play.
- The tension between tradition and new science is a recurring theme.
- The play's characters embody this struggle between hope and fear.

Key Questions:

1. What were major medical breakthroughs in the 19th century?
2. How did anatomy studies evolve?
3. What were early experiments in organ transplantation and electrotherapy?
4. How did Victorian society view medical innovation?
5. What did a typical medical education look like?

Potential Sources to Explore:

- History of organ transplantation attempts
- Nikola Tesla's early medical inventions
- Medical journals or letters from the 1890s

Debate: Experimentation in Medicine — Brave Innovation or Reckless Endangerment?

Pro (How will we ever learn if we don't experiment?):

"Experimentation is the foundation of medical breakthroughs and must be pursued boldly."

Con (Who are we to play God?):

"Experimenting on patients without full understanding risks lives and crosses ethical boundaries."

Questions:

Where should the line be drawn between innovation and patient safety? Is the pursuit of knowledge worth potential harm?