



Philosophy
Circles

The Mirror of Erised

An enquiry using an idea from Harry Potter. Good quality clips can be found online, or fetch a copy of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone DVD. No school should be without at least one.



Start with the Mirror Game. In a circle, everyone copies you as you make slow movements, as if they are your reflections. You choose a new person and everyone mirrors them. Pass it on a few more times so that several people get the chance to lead.

Next, get people to pair up, guard of honour style, facing their partner in rows. They take it in turns to be one another's mirrors. Keep it slow and quiet (give instructions in a whisper).



Play this clip which shows Harry encountering the mirror of Erised. WARNING: it's an affecting thing for anyone to watch, and apt to be a bit too much for anyone recently bereaved, so you can always elicit the story instead from the Harry Potter fans in the class. Pause the video before Dumbledore explains it.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ck4Bk6SKO7o>

Back to being mirrors, but this time, one of each pair says "I see..." and describes what he can see when he looks in the Mirror of Erised. Let them know that they can see anything - material things, themselves or other people, now, in the past, in the future. Whatever is the deepest desire of their heart. The mirrors can act out what is said, but can also ask questions to help make the picture clearer... "What are you feeling?" "What clothes are you wearing?" "Where are you?" etc.



You are now ready for discussing a whole range of questions around desire, secrets, God, good and bad people and actions, selfishness and so on. Here's a suggested way of doing it:

Gathering ideas: What did you see in your mirror? What did your partner see in you?

You could create questions, or explore these:

If scientists could create a "Pill of Erised" that people could take that would make them hallucinate what they most desired, should they?

What is the use of desires that are impossible?

When are desires a good thing to have, and when a bad?

Dumbledore says, "The happiest man alive would look into the mirror and see only himself?" Which of these do you think is true, if either:

The happier you are, the fewer desires you have. // The fewer desires you have, the happier you are.

NEXT STEPS

The attached 'Match Reports' from my time doing this at one school demonstrates how you can move on to new questions from here, either in that lesson or at home.

Thank you to the Revd Barry Linney for alerting me to the power of The Mirror of Erised as a stimulus!

Your school have paid for this resource, so please do not pass it on - we need to earn a living too!
Please recommend our free resources available at www.thephilosophyman.com

Match Reports on “The Mirror of Erised Enquiries” at Abbey Primary School, Sutton

Year 5 - God knowing the secrets of your heart

There is a Bible story in which God is described as, like the Mirror of Erised, seeing into our hearts. The prophet Samuel is sent by God to find a new king for the Israelites. God has told him that the new king will be one of the sons of Jesse. When Samuel sees the eldest son, Eliab, who is tall, strong and handsome, he assumes he is the one.

1 Samuel 16:6-7 (GWT)

When they came, he saw Eliab and thought, “Certainly, here in the LORD’s presence is his anointed king.”

But the LORD told Samuel, “Don’t look at his appearance or how tall he is, because I have rejected him. God does not see as humans see. Humans look at outward appearances, but the LORD looks into the heart.”

In the end it is David, the youngest, who is out tending the sheep who is the chosen one.

I had a rather convenient segue into this theme with one group when my partner in the mirror game said that what she saw in the mirror was God. My dilemma about how to represent that led on to the question of how could you show God, and whether it was possible. Some of them showed symbols, one was wearing a cross, some prayed, some held books to represent the bible, some showed meditation.

We explored what it would mean for God to be able to look into your heart, and how people felt about that. The class split about half and half between those who thought it was a good thing, because God could then help you, and those who preferred to have secrets. Some thought it would be good if you were good and bad if you were bad. Another boy thought that even if you were bad it would be good, because God could help you get better. Some didn’t like the idea of God knowing everything about you, and one of the questions that came up at the end was “Are we all slaves of God?”

Year 6 - Do good people get what they deserve?

With Year 6, the mirror morphed into a sort of genie, rewarding good people with what they wanted and withholding favours from bad people. That led into a discussion about whether life worked like that, or if good and bad things were mixed together regardless of how good people were. Favourite insights were that when good people did bad things, they tended to get caught because they weren't good at being bad; when bad people did good things, they got noticed because it was unusual! And of course, on to challenging the assumption that there were good and bad people rather than just actions (make a face like a bad person, make a face like a good person - but do people ever really look like that?).

Year 4 - What would good and bad people see?

We spent some time imagining what perfectly happy people would see - good things happening to other people, for example. And the other side - what unhappy people would see - for example nothing, because they didn't think they could be or have anything different to what they had already - in the words of the girl who raised the idea, because they might think "I am a nothing". That was one of those comments that rather knocked the wind out of me - because the young speaker was either recalling a very desolate feeling, or reaching for great empathy with the help of a powerful metaphor.

Year 2 - Would it be good to get everything you wanted?

In Year 2, someone had the thought of going through the mirror. We talked about whether it would be good to get everything you wanted. Someone else challenged the whole idea of someone who had everything they wanted looking in the mirror in the first place - why would they want to? That led on to whether you could want something without knowing you wanted it.

Thank you to the teachers and pupils of Abbey Primary School. The school made particularly good use of my being there by having lots of teachers covered so that nearly everyone got to watch a session - no doubt a headache to organize but worth the effort.