

Yertle the Turtle

Story Guide

Power: the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events.

1. Why do you think Yertle the Turtle thought he was superior to the other turtles?



2. Why did the other turtles obey his commands?

3. What type of government is being described? How is that pictured?

4. When Mack says:

I know, up on top you are seeing great sights

But down here at the bottom we, too, should have rights.

We turtles can't stand it. Our shells will all crack!

Besides, we need food. We are starving!" groaned Mack.

Why do you think Mack should have rights? What should they be?

5. King Yertle responds:

"You hush up your mouth!" howled the mighty King Yertle.

"You've no right to talk to the world's highest turtle.

I rule from the clouds! Over land! Over sea!

There's nothing, no, NOTHING, that's higher than me!"

Except the moon rises, challenging Yertle. What do you think the moon represents?

6. What is Dr. Seuss' message?

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The questions were more conversation starters for the classroom. There were multiple interpretations given by students.

1. Why do you think Yertle the Turtle thought he was superior to the other turtles?

Yertle declares that he is “king of the pond”. This title gives him a status among the turtles.

2. Why did the other turtles obey his commands?

It appears that the turtles obey because he is recognized as “king”. There may be a fear of punishment.

3. What type of government is being described? How is that pictured?

It describes as monarchy, but a dictatorship is also appropriate. It is pictured by his throne built out of the turtles who are his subjects.

4. When Mack says:

*I know, up on top you are seeing great sights
But down here at the bottom we, too, should have rights.
We turtles can't stand it. Our shells will all crack!
Besides, we need food. We are starving!" groaned Mack.*

Why do you think Mack should have rights? What should they be?

Dr. Seuss reorients our thinking by telling the story as a fable about turtles. Nothing divides Yertle from Mack besides a title. He subtly removes the social categories that often divide us as humans. We are forced to realize that we are all humans and there should be similar expectations for us all. Nevertheless, often that is not the case because of social class, economic wealth, or political position. Often “rights” are respected for some more than others.

5. King Yertle responds:

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"You've no right to talk to the world's highest turtle.
I rule from the clouds! Over land! Over sea!
There's nothing, no, NOTHING, that's higher than me!"*

Except the moon rises, challenging Yertle. What do you think the moon represents?

The moon makes us aware of the folly of attempting to achieve absolute power. There also an addiction that power brings. Yertle begins by asking for nine turtles, then wants hundreds of turtles, and finally he commands thousands to obey his command.

6. What is Dr. Seuss' message?

Dr. Seuss warns us about the dangers of power and in some ways how fragile it is. Power is a social reality. People give power to others because of their position, how others view them, or the ability to control resources. If enough people are willing to imagine a different social world it could begin to take place.

