

The Great Gilly Hopkins Study Guide



The Great Gilly Hopkins Study Guide serves as a comprehensive resource for students, educators, and anyone interested in understanding the themes, characters, and plot of Katherine Paterson's novel. This guide will delve into the various elements of the story, provide a summary, explore character development, and discuss significant themes and motifs that underpin the narrative. By the end of this guide, readers will have a clearer understanding of the novel and its implications.

Overview of "The Great Gilly Hopkins"

Published in 1978, "The Great Gilly Hopkins" tells the story of Gilly Hopkins, a tough and resilient foster child. Gilly has been shuffled through numerous foster homes, leading her to develop a defensive attitude and a rebellious spirit. The novel explores her struggles and her journey toward acceptance, belonging, and self-discovery.

Plot Summary

Gilly Hopkins is a bright and intelligent girl who feels abandoned by her birth mother and has a deep-seated belief that she has to fend for herself. The story begins with Gilly being placed in a new foster home with a caring but unconventional foster mother, Maimee, and a kind-hearted yet disabled boy named William Ernest.

As Gilly tries to navigate her new life, she employs various schemes to escape her situation. She is determined to reunite with her birth mother, who she believes will rescue her from foster care. Throughout the narrative, Gilly's tough exterior begins to crack as she develops relationships with Maimee and William, confronting her own fears and vulnerabilities.

The plot thickens when Gilly's past catches up with her, leading to a series of conflicts that challenge her perceptions of family, love, and loyalty. The climax of the story reveals Gilly's transformation as she learns to appreciate the people around her and embraces the idea of belonging.

Character Analysis

Understanding the characters in "The Great Gilly Hopkins" is essential for grasping the novel's deeper meanings. Here are the key characters:

1. **Gilly Hopkins:** The protagonist, a fierce and independent young girl who has been in and out of foster homes. Gilly struggles with her identity and learns to confront her past.
2. **Maimee:** Gilly's foster mother, who embodies unconditional love and acceptance. Maimee's nurturing personality challenges Gilly's defensive nature.
3. **William Ernest:** Gilly's foster brother, who is often bullied but possesses a kind heart. His relationship with Gilly helps her see the value in friendship and compassion.
4. **Mr. Randolph:** The social worker who tries to help Gilly, representing the adult world that Gilly often resists.
5. **Gilly's Birth Mother (Mary):** Though she does not appear physically in the story, her presence looms large in Gilly's mind and influences her actions and decisions.

Themes and Motifs

"The Great Gilly Hopkins" addresses several important themes that resonate with readers of all ages. Below are some of the most prominent themes:

Belonging and Family

At the heart of the novel is the theme of belonging. Gilly's journey reflects her struggle to find a place where she feels accepted. Throughout the story, she grapples with her understanding of family. The novel proves that family can be defined in various ways and is not limited to biological connections.

Identity and Self-Acceptance

Gilly's character arc represents a quest for identity. Initially, she resists any form of affection or connection, believing that she must rely solely on herself. However, as she navigates her relationships with Maimee and William, Gilly begins to accept herself and realize her worth beyond her circumstances.

The Impact of Trauma

The novel also addresses the effects of trauma on children. Gilly's experiences in the foster system have left her emotionally scarred. The story illustrates how past trauma can shape behavior and relationships, emphasizing the importance of understanding and compassion for those who have experienced hardship.

Resilience and Hope

Despite her challenges, Gilly's resilience shines through. The narrative encourages readers to remain hopeful, even in difficult situations. The relationships Gilly builds with her foster family ultimately show that love and support can heal emotional wounds.

Literary Devices

Katherine Paterson employs various literary devices to enhance the storytelling in "The Great Gilly Hopkins." Here are some notable devices:

- **Symbolism:** Objects and characters often symbolize broader themes. For example, Gilly's various attempts to escape from her foster home symbolize her struggle with commitment and fear of rejection.
- **Imagery:** Paterson uses vivid imagery to depict Gilly's emotions and the settings within the novel, allowing readers to connect more deeply with her experiences.
- **Dialogue:** The dialogue between characters reveals their personalities and emotional states. Gilly's sharp wit and sarcasm contrast with the gentleness of Maimee and the innocence of William, highlighting their differences.

Discussion Questions

To deepen the understanding of the novel, here are some discussion questions:

1. How does Gilly's perception of family evolve throughout the story?
2. In what ways do Maimee and William Ernest serve as catalysts for Gilly's transformation?
3. What role does Gilly's past play in shaping her actions and decisions? How does she confront her trauma?
4. How does the author use humor to balance the serious themes presented in the novel?
5. What message does the ending convey about the nature of hope and resilience?

Conclusion

"The Great Gilly Hopkins" is a poignant exploration of a young girl's journey toward self-discovery, acceptance, and the meaning of family. Through Gilly's experiences, readers are invited to reflect on important themes such as belonging, resilience, and the impact of trauma. This study guide serves as a tool for deeper engagement with the text, providing insights into character development, thematic elements, and literary devices. Whether in a classroom setting or for personal exploration, understanding the complexities of Gilly's story enriches the reading experience and invites discussions about the challenges faced by children in the foster care system.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the main themes explored in 'The Great Gilly Hopkins'?

The main themes include identity, belonging, family dynamics, and the impact of foster care on children.

Who is the protagonist of 'The Great Gilly Hopkins' and what is her background?

The protagonist is Gilly Hopkins, an 11-year-old girl who has lived in multiple foster homes and struggles with feelings of abandonment and a desire for a stable family.

How does Gilly's character evolve throughout the story?

Gilly evolves from being a tough and rebellious girl who pushes people away to someone who learns to trust and accept love from her new foster family.

What role does the foster family play in Gilly's life?

Gilly's foster family, particularly her foster mother Maime, plays a crucial role in helping her confront her fears and learn the value of love and acceptance.

What literary techniques are prominent in 'The Great Gilly Hopkins'?

The novel employs techniques such as first-person narration, vivid characterization, and humor to convey Gilly's experiences and emotions.

How does 'The Great Gilly Hopkins' address the concept of friendship?

The story portrays friendship as a vital support system, showing how Gilly's relationships with her peers and foster family help her navigate her struggles and grow emotionally.

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