

Teacher Study Guide

Title *Dresses, Dreams and Beadwood Leaves*

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Copyright 2009 (paperback) ISBN: 978-1-932158-85-4

Publisher High Country Publishers/Ingalls Publishing Group

Reader age Grades 4 -8

Genre Historical fiction, poetry

Setting Near Deep Gap and Boone, NC; 1948

Synopsis *Sometimes
I wonder
if I fade away
like old calico colors,
washed until
they're barely seen.*

Rosa May wears dresses made from feed sacks, but her earthy knowledge of roots and herbs gives her hope of owning a store-bought dress and feeds her dream of wearing nurse's white. When Rosa May's faded and outgrown dress draws whispers from girls from town, she decides to gather beadwood (witch hazel) to earn money to buy a dress. "Dresses, Dreams and Beadwood Leaves" sets a girl's journey to mold her own self-esteem within the cultural history of the North Carolina mountains in the late 1940s.

Additional Material Author's notes include charts and information on root and herb gathering in Southern Appalachia

Most Compelling Points

- Anchoring self-esteem
- Facing social differences within community
- Pursuing dreams; using one's personal and available resources

Ties with Curriculum

- **SS:** Set on a mountain farm near Deep Gap, NC, in 1948. Map study; effects of geographic characteristics; and mountain life.
- **ELA:** Free verse as a literary form
- **ELA:** Writing creative response, essay, journal, or poetry
- **Science:** Identification and use of native plants; conservation of natural resources
- **Art:** Pencil sketches from nature; cover design
- **Math:** Math application from tables in endnotes

Learning Activities **Map Study**
Locate Boone and Deep Gap on a map. Find the Appalachian Mountains and

the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Locate the place where you live. How far is it from the story's setting?

Geography

Describe the terrain and topography of this mountain area in the story.

Compare or contrast the land there to the land in your area.

How did the landscape help to define the way of life in the region of the story?

How do you see the influence of the geography in the story?

How does the land provide for the needs of people in the story?

What natural resources are available in the mountains and in your own region?

Compare/contrast this mountain region with your region. How has the geography of your region affected lifestyle?

Mountain Life

Root and herb gathering has been an important source of income for families across the Southern Appalachian Mountains. Plants also have been used as remedies. Notice the endnotes for more details.

What can you find on the Internet about herb gathering? What key words could start your search? ("Wildcrafting" is another term for herb gathering and may open some links to information.) Are herbs still gathered and sold?

What herbs were gathered in the story? Do these plants grow in your area? Are native plants or plant material gathered and sold where you live? (Consider berries and other fruits, nuts, wood, pines needles, grape vines, etc.)

How have plant materials been used?

(medicine/pharmaceuticals; home remedies; personal care products, such as lotions, shampoos, etc.; aroma; decoration; fuel)

"Beadwood" is a regional name for Witch Hazel, a shrub-like tree. Look up witch hazel in a field guide to trees. When does it bloom? What adjectives would describe the bloom? Why is it called "beadwood?" How is it used?

What is ginseng? Where else does it grow besides the Appalachian Mountains? Why is valuable?

Collection of plant materials is regulated to prevent the eradication of highly-gathered plants. Ginseng is among those plants that have become scarce from extensive gathering. To prevent its eradication, law prohibits collection of ginseng root before the berries ripen in September. Then, the berries should be scattered near the original plant. Why would people want to gather ginseng abundantly. What would be the result of people's disregarding regulations on gathering?

Character

How does a dress symbolize self-esteem for Rosa May?

Why is a store-bought dress important to her?

What was the source of the fabric for the dress Rosa May wore to school in the spring?

People have made do with what they had in many places, for most of human existence. What purposes did the fabric from sacks serve (before the common use of paper bags)?

Brainstorm: List ten (or more) ways to use fabric bags.

In the story, what other uses for sacks that are mentioned besides dress fabric?

How does Rosa May feel about the girls in town?

How do they feel about her?

How did you feel when they whispered and talked about her dress?

How would you have felt?

Think of a time when you felt put down by someone else.

How would you describe your feelings?

Write a journal entry about that event and your feelings.

Have your feelings toward the other person changed since the event?

Talk about self-esteem. What is it? Where do we find our self-esteem?

How important is self-esteem?

What is the difference between self-esteem and conceit?

--between pride and conceit? Is pride good or bad?

How did Rosa May feel when she heard the girls whispering about her dress and her family? Do you know that feeling?

Have you caused someone else's feelings to be hurt? Write in your journal about that time.

If you could return to that time, would you do the same thing?

How do you see the parents' pride in the story?

What are Rosa May's dreams?

What does Rosa May do to secure her own self-esteem and to obtain a part of her dream?

Did she make wise choices?

Were you surprised with the ending? What do you think Rosa May learned during the summer as she gathered beadwood to earn money for the dress?

If, in the end, she had bought the dress, what would be different? What would she have learned?

From the author: I tried to let Rosa May get the dress, but in the end, I could not. I knew that would not have been the best solution to her situation. Why?

What dreams do you have?

What can you do now that prepares you to reach your dreams?

Literary Form

Look at the form in which the story is told.

What other books use free verse to tell a story?

(*Out of the Dust*, *Aleutian Sparrow*, *Love That Dog*, *Locomotion*, etc.)

Think of a special moment in your life—or a special person. Using short lines, try capturing the image of your thoughts in words.

Write a poem or series of poems to tell a story or to reflect on an event.

Was the process harder or easier than you expected?

What is a free verse poem? Why is it a poem?

How does it differ from prose?

If the words were written without line breaks, would the change in form affect the way the message is perceived?

Read William Carlos Williams poem, *The Red Wheel Barrow*.

Copy the poem as one line. How does that form change what you perceive?

How is rhythm an important part of free verse?

How does it differ from the rhythms typical of rhymed poetry?

Read several poems as you consider the comparison.

Do the sounds of words matter in free verse? How so?

Free verse is spare.

How does this affect the telling of the story?

Do you like the poetic form *Dresses*, *Dreams and Beadwood Leaves*? Do you find it effective? Why or why not?

Rewrite a poem from the text as narrative prose.

Linking with Other Writing

What other books reflect the NC mountain region?

Read *Where the Lilies Bloom*, by Bill and Vera Cleaver.

What do the children in that story do that reflects what Rosa May did?

Compare the lifestyle of the two families.

Compare/contrast the roles of Rosa May in *Dresses*, *Dreams and Beadwood Leaves* and Mary Call in *Where the Lilies Bloom*.

Art and Design

Book covers are important because they are the first part of a book that a reader notices. The cover must raise an interesting question or otherwise catch attention.

Look at the cover of *Dresses, Dreams and Beadwood Leaves*. Notice the elements of the design. Consider color, texture, text design, items pictures, and the placement of these. How does the cover image reflect the story as a whole?

Math

Use the tables at the end for math application:

- Comparison of fresh leaf weight to dried leaf weight
- Comparison of prices at different times
- Comparison of prices paid for different herbs
- Calculation of money earned by gathering different herbs in different quantities
- Estimation of time invested

Dramatic Presentations

Present a reading of poems with dramatic accompaniment.

Powerful Passages

Find examples of quotes from the story that are particularly meaningful to you. Discuss why these passages caught your attention. What do you think the author intended? What special meaning do these passages have for you?

Become an Expert:

- Learn about native plant in the NC mountains or your region.
- Learn about traditional uses of native plants.
- Learn about ginseng.
- Learn about edible plants.
- Learn about “recycling” of fabrics, including sacks.
- Learn about quilting.
- Learn how to bake biscuits and make chocolate gravy.
- Learn about growing and preserving vegetables.

*Sensitive
issues*

Insensitivity of peers; taunting

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