

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Five Little Peppers and How They Grew

by
Margaret Sidney

Book Information

Margaret Sidney, Five Little Peppers and How They Grew

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For the five poor Pepper children, life is very hard until Jasper King tumbles into their lives.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Community Life, Poverty; Family Life, Brothers; Family Life, Misc./Other; Family Life, Sisters; Series, Charming Classics

Main Characters

Ben at twelve years old, the mature and responsible oldest child of the five Pepper children

David the youngest boy, who is the most delicate of the five and is very sensitive and quiet

Jasper (Jappy) a kind and honest boy who befriends the Peppers

Joel the middle child, who can be very selfish but is a generous and caring boy at heart

Miss Jerusha Henderson the parson's abrasive and judgmental sister

Mr. King Jasper's father, who has a tough exterior but a very generous and good heart

Mrs. Pepper (mamsie) a widowed mother who does her best to raise her children to be good and kind people

Phronsie the baby of the family, who is very much beloved by all the other children and is very sweet but apt to get into trouble trying to help her siblings and mother

Polly the second oldest child, who is also very responsible and constantly helps her mother

Vocabulary

discomfited confused, frustrated, or embarrassed
industrious persistent and hard working

shakedown a simple type of bed often used in the past

Synopsis

Ben, Polly, Joel, David, and Phronsie Pepper live with their mother, a seamstress, who is raising the children alone after the death of her husband. Although Ben and Polly, the oldest children, do their best to help their mother, the family has very little money. The children get along well with each other, however, and the family is quite happy.

The children's love for their mother becomes apparent as they plan to bake a cake for her birthday. It does not turn out exactly as they had planned, but the cake is a success anyway. A few days later, though, all of the children, except for David, get sick with the measles. Polly's case is the worst, as she nearly goes blind because of the strain she put on her eyes while trying to help her mother with the sewing. But with the doctor's careful treatment, Polly is soon cured. The kind doctor also surprises Polly by giving her family a new stove, which is desperately needed.

Trouble strikes again when little Phronsie disappears with a traveling organ grinder. After a panic-filled search, Ben discovers her sleeping under the watchful eyes of Jasper and his dog, Prince. The boys become instant friends, and a few days later Jasper comes to visit the family of the little girl whose life he had probably saved. He is immediately accepted into the family, but is astounded to learn that none of the children have ever experienced a traditional Christmas. Jasper is unable to visit later that week because both he and his father are sick. After receiving the package of cakes sent by the children and Phronsie's gingerbread man, Mr. King is so intrigued by the family that he himself comes to visit them and, in spite of his gruff nature, is charmed as well.

Jasper and his father leave the next day to return to the city, but he and the Peppers continue to write each other. That year, all the Pepper children have a traditional Christmas. Ben and Polly plan to surprise the little ones, but are instead surprised

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themselves through the generosity of Jasper and the other townspeople.

The next summer, Jasper asks Polly to visit him in the city. Although Polly likes Jasper's sister, Mrs. Whitney, her three sons, and the beautiful mansion in which he lives, she misses her own family. Consequently, Mr. King brings Phronsie and then eventually the entire Pepper family to visit as well. The visit goes so well that Mr. King asks Mrs. Pepper to stay and care for his house, a request that means that her children will finally be able to get an education.

The story ends with the return of Mrs. Whitney's husband, who turns out to be Mrs. Pepper's cousin. The children are thrilled to discover that, except for Jasper, they are all cousins, and everything indicates a bright future for all.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why is Mrs. Pepper so reluctant to send Polly to visit Jasper for the summer?

Mrs. Pepper is a good woman who is also proud. She hesitates to accept charity from anyone, for herself or for her children. Consequently, she refuses to send Polly to stay at a place where she would be receiving so much in the form of education if she could not give her friendly benefactors something in return. Mrs. Pepper finally allows Polly to go because Mr. King convinces her that Polly's visit will improve Jasper's health. Therefore, Mrs. Pepper no longer feels she will owe Mr. King and his family anything for being so good to Polly.

Literary Analysis

How and why does Mr. King change after the Peppers come to visit him?

Mr. King becomes less irritable and difficult after the Peppers come to live with him mainly because he has to look after and care about people besides himself. Helping the Peppers gives him something to do; so instead of being bored and ill-humored, he is happy because he has a chance to accomplish something meaningful. Mr. King is also probably affected because the Pepper children do not judge him, but rather accept him for all his strengths and weaknesses, whereas many other people form negative opinions about him.

Inferential Comprehension

What effect does the Peppers' poverty have on their relationship as a family?

The Peppers' poverty probably brings them closer together as a family. Because the children have few other ways of occupying their time, they spend a lot of time together and depend on one another for survival as well as for companionship. They also have fewer toys to fight over than children of wealthier families, and the toys they do have are precious and have to be shared.

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Constructing Meaning

A stereotype is an opinion formed about a large group of people based on the characteristics of a few individuals rather than on the facts of the group. Stereotypes are part of almost everyone's way of thinking; however, they are often false. In the story, one of the major characteristics of the Pepper family is that they are very poor. What are some of the commonly held negative stereotypes of the poor, and how does the Pepper family contrast with these stereotypes? How would these stereotypes be different if they were based on the characteristics of the Peppers?

Poor people are often wrongly considered lazy, weak, untrustworthy, selfish, irresponsible, or ungrateful. Many people seem to believe that the poor have no money because they do not want to work or because they spend their money on harmful things such as drugs or alcohol. Although there may be some instances where this is true, most people living in poverty are not content with their way of life and are struggling to succeed. In the Peppers' case, Mrs. Pepper is only able to make enough money to feed her family. Contrary to the stereotype, the family is good-natured, hard working, honest, respectful, independent, and so generous that they would give away what little they had to help someone else. If the stereotypes were based on the Peppers' characteristics, they would be positive instead of negative.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization Although Mr. Pepper is only mentioned once in the story, he has a role in the development of his children. Using the details given about the children in the story, have the students create a personality profile of what they think Mr. Pepper would have been like. Suggest that they consider which characteristics of the children are similar to those displayed by Mrs. Pepper and which characteristics are very different. Then have the students draw a picture of Mr. Pepper that shows his physical characteristics, again based on those displayed by his children.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The story takes place in the early 1800's. To demonstrate the difference between then and now, have the students present a show called "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous in the 1800's." Depending on the class size, the project can be done as a class or in smaller groups. Have the students find out who the rich and famous were at the time and what their lives were like, how they spent their time, what transportation they had, and what latest technologies they used. They could also feature Mr. King, Jasper, and the Pepper family and compare their lifestyles to those of the people they had researched. One student can be the announcer, several others can be the people being interviewed, and the rest can play family members, servants, audience members, or other roles that are needed. The students can use whatever props or costumes they need.

Comparing and Contrasting In the story, the Pepper children entertain themselves in a lot of creative ways, such as telling stories, baking, playing make-believe, and working on various craft projects. Have the students compare and contrast their activities with the activities in which the Peppers participate. What are the major differences and similarities? Ask the students to consider if any of their activities are modern versions of those in which the Peppers participate. For example, telling and listening to stories could be similar to watching movies.

Responding to Literature The little brown house seems to develop a personality of its own and almost becomes one of the characters. Have each student think about what kind of personality his or her house has and why. Then have each draw a picture of his or her house that shows its personality, accompanied by a short written explanation as well.