

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Great Gilly Hopkins by Katherine Paterson

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## Book Information

Katherine Paterson, The Great Gilly Hopkins  
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Book Level: 4.6  
Interest Level: MG

An eleven-year-old foster child tries to cope with her longings and fears as she schemes against everyone who tries to be friendly.

**Award:** Christopher Award; Jane Addams Book Award/Honor Books; National Book Award/Honors; Newbery Honor

**Topics:** Emotions, Love; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8

## Main Characters

Agnes Stokes a girl from school who wants to be friends with Gilly

Courtney Hopkins Gilly's biological mother, who lives in California

Galadriel (Gilly) Hopkins an eleven-year-old foster-care child who wants to live with her mother

Maime Trotter the foster parent for Gilly and William Ernest

Miss Ellis Gilly's social worker

Miss Harris Gilly's sixth-grade teacher

Mr. Randolph the elderly, blind man who lives next door to Trotter

Mrs. Hopkins Gilly's grandmother from Virginia; mother to Courtney

William Ernest (W.E.) Teague a young foster-care boy staying with Maime Trotter

## Vocabulary

**cajoling** persuading with flattery or gentle urging

**futile** serving no useful purpose, ineffective

**repertory** a storage place or the things prepared for a performance

**submission** the condition of being humble or compliant

## Synopsis

Galadriel "Gilly" Hopkins, is an eleven-year-old foster child. Over the past three years, she has changed homes three times, sometimes due to circumstances and sometimes due to her own negative behavior. As the story opens, Miss Ellis, her social worker, is taking Gilly to the home of Maime Trotter, a foster-care mother for the past twenty years. She hopes Gilly and Trotter will be a good match. Gilly's main concern is to find her mother so that she can finally have a permanent home.

Maime Trotter has another foster child, William Ernest. Upon her arrival, Gilly decides to do everything she can to gain control over the obese Maime Trotter and the introverted William Ernest. When Trotter asks Gilly to go next door and accompany Mr. Randolph, the next door neighbor, to the house, Gilly is stunned to see a small, blind black man. Gilly feels disgusted with Trotter's house and its inhabitants. Shortly after arriving, Gilly receives a postcard from her biological mother, Courtney Rutherford Hopkins, with a message of "wish you were here." Finding an address in the corner, Gilly decides that somehow she will go to her mother.

On her first day at her new school, Gilly discovers her teacher, Miss Harris, is a young black woman, to whom Gilly has a hard time adjusting. That same day she gets into a fight, which earns her the admiration of Agnes Stokes, another misfit at the school, whose friendship Gilly does not want.

A few days later, Trotter asks Gilly to read for Mr. Randolph. While pulling out a book from the shelf at Mr. Randolph's house, two five-dollar bills float down. Gilly knows this is her chance to get a bus ticket and set off for California, but she needs more money. Gilly cleans Trotter's house, hoping to later volunteer to dust at Mr. Randolph's without causing suspicion. Unable to reach the top shelf, Gilly enlists the help of Agnes and William Ernest in her attempt

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to search for money. Although the plan works, it nets only a total of \$44.00, not enough for a ticket. Dejected, Gilly pens a lie-filled letter to her mother complaining about the horrible conditions of her foster care.

A few days later, while getting a tie for Mr. Randolph from Trotter's bedroom, Gilly sees over \$100 in Trotter's purse. She takes the money. That night she sneaks out of the house and heads to the bus depot where a suspicious ticket seller calls the police; Gilly is taken down to the station for questioning. Gilly is defiant, and only a plea from William Ernest to come home makes her go back to Trotter's. She confesses to taking the money, gives Mr. Randolph back the amount she stole, and agrees to work for Trotter to repay her money.

Just before Thanksgiving, everyone except Gilly gets the flu. On Thanksgiving Day, an elderly lady arrives and announces she is Gilly's grandmother, Mrs. Hopkins. She finds sick people all over the house, with Gilly trying to care for them all. She tells Gilly that Courtney wrote her. Mrs. Hopkins promises to get Gilly out of the foster home. Coming home from school the next Monday, Gilly hears from Miss Ellis that Gilly has a permanent home starting the next day. Now Gilly is sorry for writing the letter and does not want to go to the grandmother's house, but Trotter tells her she must.

After a quiet car ride to the Virginia home of Mrs. Hopkins, Gilly chooses a deceased uncle's bedroom rather than her mother's old room. Somehow, Courtney's bedroom did not seem right for Gilly. Gilly writes to William Ernest that her mother is coming for Christmas. The day before Christmas, an excited Gilly waits with her grandmother at the airport, but when Courtney arrives, Gilly learns she only came because Mrs. Hopkins sent money. Gilly will not be going back to California with her. Quickly Gilly makes an excuse and phones Trotter from the airport. Trotter tells her that life does not always work out the way we want it to, and that she will just have to make the best of it. Before hanging up, Gilly admits that she loves Trotter, then joins her grandmother to make the best of her new home.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

On her first day at a new school, why does Gilly take the ball away from the boys during recess?

*Answers may reflect that Gilly wants to be noticed or that she had caused problems at previous schools. Students may say that Gilly does not know how to make friends and this is her way of being in control of a situation. Gilly seems to enjoy making the boys angry at her and really does not want to play a game with any of them.*

### Literary Analysis

Mr. Randolph does not seem close to his own son. Why might he choose not to live with his son in Virginia?

*Mr. Randolph seems to be the type of person who likes his independence even though he is disabled. He thinks that his son would treat him like he was not capable of doing things for himself if they lived together. He might be worried that his son would have too many rules to follow. Perhaps Mr. Randolph believes his son really would not want his father living with him. Overall, Mr. Randolph enjoys being able to live by himself and have his own life.*

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## Inferential Comprehension

What type of person makes a good foster-care parent? What qualities does Maime Trotter have that makes her a good foster care parent?

*Foster-care parents must love children and want to help them grow up to be loving adults. They also should be good role models with high ethical standards. They must have the right balance of being strict and being loving. Trotter is extremely patient with Gilly, especially when the girl first arrives. The way Trotter deals with William Ernest shows that she loves children and wants to help and protect them. She has rules that W.E. and Gilly must follow, and when Gilly steals the money, Trotter makes her work to pay off the debt rather than just forgetting about it. Trotter seems to know when the children need a hug and when they need to be alone.*

## Constructing Meaning

How is Gilly's idea of what her mother is like more like a fairy tale image rather than the true picture?

*Gilly only has the photograph of her mother, which shows her at a much earlier time in her life. This is the picture that Gilly uses to construct an image of the perfect mother. Also, the cards and letters that Gilly has received from her mother give the impression and hope that Courtney is coming to take Gilly home with her, even though that is not the case. Students may mention that Miss Ellis, the social worker, knows the mother and has worked the case for eight years. Even when she tries to tell Gilly the truth about Courtney, Gilly refuses to believe it.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Characterization** The author describes each main character quite vividly in the book. Have students choose a character and then find the descriptive paragraphs about that character throughout the book. They can create the character through some type of medium such as drawing/painting, clay sculpture, soft sculpture, dress-a-doll, or another type. Have students write a short paragraph to describe their creation

including quotes from the book.

**Comparing and Contrasting** Gilly's real name is Galadriel, which is taken from J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. Have students read the chapter in Tolkien's book called the "Mirror of Galadriel," which refers specifically to Galadriel. Compare Gilly to Galadriel. How are the two different in appearance? in attitude? Although Tolkien's creation is an elf queen, how are the two similar? Have students write a short compare/contrast paper about the two Galadriels.

**Recognizing Feelings** Gilly says she has a repertory of smiles or faces she uses depending on the situation. Have the students find the references to her different faces in the book. If a camera is available, take pictures of students posing to show the type of face Gilly might have made in each situation. Or have students draw a face smiling as Gilly does in various incidents. Include a written description of when a person would use each particular smile. Combine them to make a booklet.

**Responding to Literature** Mr. Randolph loves listening to poetry and can recite his most-loved poems. Bring a sample of old English poetry to class to show the students why Gilly had a hard time reading the first part of the book, *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. Find a few poems by Wordsworth, if possible, for the class to read aloud. Have students choose their own favorite or special poems and practice reading them aloud. Then allow a time for volunteers to read their poems to the class or to recite from memory.