

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The House of Dies Drear

by

Virginia Hamilton

Book Information

Virginia Hamilton, The House of Dies Drear

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279 Pages

Book Level: 4.8

Interest Level: MG

This mystery concerns an African-American boy's move to Drear House, which had once played a part in the Underground Railroad.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Misc./Other; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Adventure, Escape; History, Slavery; Mysteries, Misc./Other; People, African American; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks

Main Characters

Mayhew Pluto's son, an actor who has returned to help his ailing father and secure the legacy of the Drear house

Mr. Pluto a son of slaves who serves as groundskeeper for the house of Dies Drear and its secret, but fantastic, treasure

Mr. Small Thomas's father, a historian whose passionate interest in the history of his people leads him to rent the old house once used for the Underground Railroad

Mrs. Small Thomas's mother, who puts aside her doubts to follow her husband to the mysterious house in Ohio

Pesty a mysterious young girl who lives with the Darrows, but serves as Pluto's helpmate and companion

the Darrows a neighboring family who have menaced Pluto and the Drear house for years, on suspicion of a treasure they claim for their own

Thomas Small a curious, thoughtful, thirteen-year-old boy who is called on to help preserve the mysteries of the house of Dies Drear

Vocabulary

abolitionist a person opposed to slavery during the time it existed in the United States

ambush lying in wait to attack

bellows a device that produces a stream of air when the two sides are pressed together

gerfalcon a large, fierce, strong falcon

quatre-foil a circular design made up of four converging arcs

rounder slang for an immoral person or drunkard

stalactite an icicle-shaped deposit of calcium carbonate hanging from the roof of a cave, also formed by dripping, calcium-rich water

stalagmite a cone-shaped deposit of calcium carbonate built up on the floor of a cave by dripping water

Synopsis

As the story opens, Thomas Small and his family are leaving their home in North Carolina to fulfill his father's dream. The dream involves moving north to Ohio to live in the home of the famous abolitionist, Dies Drear. The home was a pivotal location for slaves fleeing the South via the Underground Railroad, and Drear's operation even extended to sending slaves back to the South to help others.

The house itself is a massive, inhospitable structure, dark and menacing. Within a few hours of the family's arrival, Thomas finds a secret passageway beneath the veranda steps and is frightened by an inexplicable sighing sound. He hears the same sound later that night in the woods behind the house and is chased all the way home by the mysterious Mr. Pluto, the house's groundskeeper. As Pluto explains that he mistook Thomas for a stranger, Mr. Small notices something about Pluto he can't name, but that troubles him greatly.

The next day, the family discovers that three mysterious triangles were placed in the bedroom

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doorways. They suspect mischief on the part of Pluto, who might resent their intrusion into his domain. After they attend church, they return home to a scene of destruction in the kitchen, where someone has dumped the contents of the refrigerator on the floor. Now, Mr. Small means to get to the bottom of things, and he and Thomas head for a confrontation with Pluto.

They take Pluto by surprise in the cave where he makes his home. When Mr. Small follows him into the deep recesses of the cave, he is stunned to come upon a room full of treasure! To the shocked Smalls, Pluto reveals that this cave houses the treasures collected by Dies Drear, based on the "day by day bartering of black people." This was Dies Drear's legacy, and Pluto had felt it his duty to protect it from marauders like the Darrows, a local family that retains a misguided claim to the treasure. While Mr. Small tries to comprehend what he's heard, it is suddenly revealed that there is another Pluto at the Drear house. Pluto's son, Mayhew, has returned to protect his sick father from what he supposed was a threat from the Smalls. After some discussion, the Smalls, Mayhew, and Pluto come to an understanding of each other and their common goal in protecting Drear's legacy. They formulate a plan to ensure that the treasure will stay out of the Darrows' hands forever.

They lure the Darrows to Pluto's cave and present themselves as the ghosts of Dies Drear and two runaway slaves. As the startled Darrow group runs from Pluto's cave in panic, Pluto and Mr. Small reveal their contempt for the Darrows by laughing at them pointedly. Pluto knows the clan will never return again.

By the end of the story, Mr. Small has taken on the project of making an inventory of all the Drear treasure, attacking his task with a sense of duty equal to that of the ailing Pluto. It seems likely that the legacy of Dies Drear will be protected forever.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Both Pluto and the Darrows claimed Dies Drear's treasure as their "legacy." What was the difference between their ideas of what that legacy was?

Pluto implies that, over the years, the Darrows have felt "entitled" to the legacy of Dies Drear strictly in the sense of the monetary aspects of the treasure. For Pluto, the legacy is something much more--something he came to seek long before he knew of the riches hidden in the secret cave. To Pluto, the legacy of Dies Drear was the memory and spirit of all the slaves who were helped to freedom here.

Literary Analysis

As revealed in the story, the Greek cross was a symbol of freedom and assistance for fleeing slaves, and their lives depended on reading the crosses to discover the way to safety. What was the secret of the crosses that allowed slaves to "read" them and understand their meaning?

As explained in the story, the pivotal element in cross reading was that the triangles be left in place. Slaves would always discover this sign on an object perpendicular to the ground, and they would stand directly before it. Then, depending on the way the sides of the triangles pointed, the fleeing slave could ascertain the way to safety.

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Inferential Comprehension

What was one important way in which Pluto and Mr. Small were similar?

Both were passionately interested in the history of their people and almost inexplicably drawn to this particular place to seek their "legacy." Mr. Small has always dreamed of living in a home on the Underground Railroad. Pluto came to the Drear house seeking a legacy he could not identify, but somehow he knew it would be found there. By the end of the story, it is obvious that Mr. Small has been captivated by the same task that occupied the ailing Pluto for so many years--preserving the treasure as the physical symbol of the heritage they both share.

Constructing Meaning

The novel begins with Thomas having a frightening dream in which he runs away from the specter of a devilish man. What does this dream tell the reader about Thomas's state of mind?

The man in the dream warns Thomas to "stay back" in Carolina. The reader thus learns that the issue of "home" and where the boy truly feels he belongs shall probably be a theme in the pages to come. Whether the specter's instructions are a warning against entering the "haunted" domain of Dies Drear, or a projection of Thomas's own desire to remain in Carolina, cannot be determined from the dream. A further clue to Thomas's character, however, is that the fear comes only at the dream's end. He thinks logically in the dream and acts creatively to save himself, a sign that the boy is resourceful.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features The idea of a "legacy" is an important aspect of the theme of *The House of Dies Drear*. In order to understand what it means to have a legacy, ask students to think what legacy will be theirs as a result of being a member of their particular family, ethnic group, generation, sex, or religion. What are the privileges, traditions, and expectations that their

legacy will grant them? Assign students to write two to three paragraphs about their legacy and share them with the class.

Understanding Characterization Mr. Small called Pluto "living history," and indeed, the Pluto character is one of the most fascinating in the book. To better appreciate the craft of characterization, assign students to write a composition in which they describe this character in as much detail as possible. Students should include what they know of his past, his passion for the history of his people, and his basic character. What did Mr. Small mean by the comment quoted above?

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors An interesting detail about the Underground Railroad discussed in the book was the crosses that slaves learned to "read" as signposts to freedom. As *The House of Dies Drear* is a work of fiction, it might serve an instructional purpose to research whether the cross reading is a historically accurate detail. Assign students to research the Underground Railroad, either on the Internet, or in books or encyclopedias, to determine what kinds of symbols, signs, and other aids were used to help navigate runaway slaves to the stops along the Railroad.

Understanding the Author's Craft A mystery story depends on the skillful planting of clues throughout the story to build suspense and plot. One of these clues was the strange feeling experienced by Mr. Small on several occasions when he encounters Pluto. As an exercise in understanding the craft of the mystery writer, go through the book and note the "clues" about Mr. Pluto that are later explained by the fact that "Pluto" was often Mayhew in disguise.