

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for A Little Princess (Unabridged) by Frances Hodgson Burnett

## Book Information

Frances Hodgson Burnett, A Little Princess (Unabridged)

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Interest Level: MG

In this children's classic novel, the wealthy and gifted little girl Sara Crewe must adjust to a different life when her father dies penniless.

**Topics:** Adventure, Life Changes; Community Life, Poverty; Family Life, Death; Series, Scholastic Classics

## Main Characters

Becky the scullery maid whom Sara befriends; Sara later lives next to her in the attic

Captain Ralph Crewe Sara's loving but impulsive father, who is in the British military service in India; he speculates in diamond mines with a friend, loses his fortune, and dies from jungle fever

Emily Sara's most treasured doll, given to her by her father

Ermengarde St. John a chubby girl who is the dunce of the school; she is befriended and defended by Sara

Janet, Nora, and Donald Carmichael three of the Carmichaels' eight children

Jessie Lavinia's best friend

Lavinia Herbert the oldest girl at the boarding school; she is jealous of Sara when Sara takes Lavinia's place as Miss Minchin's show pupil

Lottie Legh the youngest girl at the boarding school, whose manipulative behavior only Sara is able to control

Miss Amelia Miss Minchin's timid and weak sister, who does Miss Minchin's bidding

Miss Maria Minchin the greedy and vengeful headmistress of the girl's boarding school that Sara attends

Monsieur Dufarge the French teacher at the boarding school

Mr. Barrow a solicitor who has control of Captain Crewe's business affairs in England

Mr. Carmichael Mr. Carrisford's lawyer, who helps locate Captain Crewe's daughter; Mr. Carmichael is the loving father of the Large Family

Mr. Carrisford Captain Crewe's best friend, who encouraged the Captain to invest in diamond mines; he is sickly and guilt-ridden by the events that occurred when the investment failed

Ram Dass Mr. Carrisford's Indian servant, who transforms Sara's sparse attic room into a beautiful place

Sara Crewe the principal character of the story; a very rich young girl who is the show pupil in the boarding school where she lives until her fortunes change with her father's death and she is reduced to the life of a poor servant

## Vocabulary

**asperity** harshness or ill-temper

**audacity** boldness, especially in disregarding proper or conventional behavior

**bungalow** a one-story tiled or thatched house in India surrounded by a wide porch or verandah

**eccentric** strange, departing from the normal way of doing things

**impudent** bold or shameless

**largesse** great generosity in the giving of gifts

**Lascar** an East Indian sailor or army servant

**salaams** low bows made as acts of submission and honor

## Synopsis

As a girl of seven, Sara Crewe is brought by her extremely wealthy father from India to England to attend Miss Minchin's boarding school, the Select Seminary for Young Ladies. Sara is a curious child -- contemplative, intelligent, and insightful. She makes Miss Minchin uncomfortable because of her uncanny ability to make the best of every situation and to understand other people. Miss Minchin has no other option than to give Sara the status of a show pupil, much to the chagrin of some jealous classmates, especially Lavinia. Sara immediately

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becomes the advocate of the younger children and a friend to the chubby and slow Ermengarde. Sara is never stingy with her wealth and mesmerizes the children with her doll and her stories.

On Sara's eleventh birthday, her fortunes abruptly and dramatically change. Miss Minchin receives news of Captain Crewe's death and learns that his investment in diamond mines with an old school friend was a total failure. Miss Minchin is outraged at the debts she has incurred on Sara's behalf and takes out her frustrations on her. She strips Sara of all her fineries and orders her to live in a rat-infested attic room next to the scullery maid, Becky. Sara, once adored as a princess, looks like a beggar, and suffers constant hunger, cold, and loneliness in her new position as a servant. Becky, Ermengarde, and little Lottie comfort her when they can. Sara continues to behave and treat others as though she were a princess, however. She befriends the sparrows on her roof and a rat family that lives behind her attic walls. She gives her food to a beggar girl who is hungrier than she. She runs errands in her threadbare clothes and is mistaken for a beggar by a little boy who lives nearby. He is but one of many children in a family whom Sara affectionately calls the Large Family. Sara keeps herself from falling into deep despair by making up stories about the Large Family and about her life in the attic.

One day, movers come to the vacant house next door to the school to unload furniture. The Large Family's father, Mr. Carmichael, is directing the operation. Shortly thereafter, a sickly gentleman, Mr. Carrisford, who had lived in India, and his native Indian man-servant, a Lascar by the name of Ram Dass, occupy the house. Unbeknownst to Sara, Mr. Carrisford is Captain Crewe's friend who had encouraged him to invest in diamond mines. He, too, had been sick with jungle fever when the mines failed, but the investment has rebounded, and he is now very rich. He has been searching for Captain Crewe's daughter for two years, worried about her fate. Mr. Carmichael is Mr. Carrisford's lawyer and travels to Russia to investigate the latest lead on Sara's whereabouts.

Mr. Carrisford's monkey escapes one day from Ram Dass's shoulder and runs into Sara's open attic window while she is peering outside. Ram Dass comes across the roof to catch him, and Sara engages him in a short conversation in his own language. Ram Dass is charmed by Sara and observes the atrocious conditions under which she is forced to live. He shares her tale with Mr. Carrisford, and together, they decide to change the poor girl's existence. Ram Dass repeatedly sneaks into Sara's room while she is either sleeping or working and transforms her dingy room into a beautiful place, always providing food and coal for her fireplace as well as pretty things. Sara thinks Magic has helped her, but she is more comforted in believing that she has a friend. Sara's happy demeanor disturbs Miss Minchin, because Sara remains pleasant despite Miss Minchin's ever-increasing severity. However, when Sara receives beautiful clothing from her anonymous friend, Miss Minchin fears Sara has a benefactor watching, so Miss Minchin returns Sara to her former seat as a show pupil.

The monkey again comes to Sara's room one evening, and she returns it herself to the Carrisford house the next morning. When Mr. Carrisford learns she was born in India and that her father had died penniless, he is taken aback. Mr. Carmichael is there, having just returned from Russia, and he continues to question Sara, ultimately discovering that she is the child Mr. Carrisford has been seeking over the years. Sara is at first disturbed, since she feels Mr. Carrisford was responsible for her father's death. But Mrs. Carmichael is fetched, and she explains to Sara the circumstances of Mr. Carrisford's illness and that Mr. Carrisford was also her secret friend who was responsible for the transformation of her attic room. Sara is grateful to Mr. Carrisford for bringing such magic into her hopelessness.

Miss Minchin arrives to fetch Sara back but is informed of Sara's new wealth and that Sara will now be staying with Mr. Carrisford. Sara asks that Becky be allowed to attend her, and Becky is

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brought to live with Sara. Sara's dignity is restored, and, ever the princess, she plans to use her wealth to help feed the hungry beggar children of the city.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

How are animals important in this story?

*Animals sustain Sara while she lives in her attic room. She is generous to the rats and sparrows, just as she had been to the younger children and to Ermengarde when she had lived downstairs as a student. In both cases, she is the friend of outcasts. The animals help Sara reflect on something other than her miserable situation and help curb her heartbreak. Even more importantly, the monkey serves as the link to her rescue from the misery she is experiencing. She meets Ram Dass through the monkey, and while returning the runaway monkey to his owner, her identity is discovered. As a result, her dignity is restored.*

#### Literary Analysis

What attitudes does the author convey toward the rich and the poor in her writing?

*The author's writing mirrors the social climate of the 1800s in England. Society was very stratified, and there was a huge difference between the lives of the rich and poor. Frances Hodgson Burnett accurately portrays the social prejudices and true motives of her characters. She looks at people individually, and therefore, the reader sees the goodness of Sara, the heartbreak of Mr. Carrisford, the generosity and impulsiveness of Captain Crewe, the snobbishness of Lavinia, the simplicity of Ermengarde, etc. The poor have their contrasts, too. While Becky and Anne are good souls, the cook is spiteful. Burnett seems to advocate generosity to the poor and recognition of them as human beings with feelings and needs, rather than as mere lower class servants.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

Why is Becky's birthday present of the pincushion one of the most precious gifts Sara has ever received?

*The pincushion is precious because it is a gift given from Becky's very soul. It comes about as a result of sacrifice and not from an excess. What Becky needs most at the end of a day is time to rest, for she is worked hard for long hours. Instead, she spends her sleep time to make Sara a pincushion. Also, by describing the gift as she does, she shows Sara that she is able to use her own imagination and transform a simple pincushion into a gift suitable for a princess. Sara is able to perceive this, and thus, is able to appreciate the preciousness of the gift.*

#### Constructing Meaning

Sara has an active imagination and creates a fantasy world to help herself survive emotionally. Many children create fantasies for themselves when they are young, even though they may not be under emotional stress. When you were younger, what fantasy or fantasies did you create for yourself when you played or needed to soothe yourself?

*Student's answers will vary as much as their imaginations. Some may have pretended to be rich, famous, or wealthy, while others may have pretended to be a super-hero or a character in a movie or book. Still others may have had an imaginary friend. If they did not have a make-believe world, discussion should focus on the value of pretending.*

### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** In order to understand the relationship between Ram Dass and Mr. Carrisford to a greater degree, assign the students to research England's colonization of the Indian subcontinent and the relationship between the English and Indian people. Have students choose one of the following topics and write a report on it: the reasons for the colonization, Indian resistance to British rule, the role of Indian

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servants, or the return to Indian independence.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** The names in the story are Dickensonian in nature. Have the students generate a list of the characters' names and then, with the use of a dictionary, find root words, prefixes, or suffixes. With a book of names and their meanings, have students write down the meaning of the various names in the book. Ask the students to comment about how a particular name fits the caricature of the person. For example, Sara means "princess" -- Sara thought herself to be a princess; Crewe is a borough in southwestern England, and a crew is a ship's personnel -- Sara's father, Captain Crewe, was an army captain who directed personnel and may have been born in southwestern England; Mina, found in the name Minchin, means "threatening," so in effect, Minchin means "threatening chin" -- Miss Minchin was a harsh woman and tried to threaten people with her authority.

**Comparing and Contrasting** Using the descriptions in the narrative, have the students illustrate the contrasts between Sara's rooms when she first arrived at the school to the attic room where she was banished. Other opposing pictures can also be drawn: Sara in all her finery, contrasted to a picture of her in her too-small black frock; Mr. Carrisford both before and after he found Sara; and Anne as she looked as a beggar and how she looks as a baker's helper.

**Recognizing Details** In one scene in the story, Sara takes small forgotten objects and uses them to transform her attic room into a grand banquet room in which a princess could feast. Students may be familiar with the *I Spy* series of books in which tiny objects are used to create fantastic scenes. Ask the students to collect small objects and create an elegant scene using a shoebox as the background. Some suggestions include using spools of thread of various sizes for a table and chairs; scraps of cloth for tablecloths, rugs, and curtains; and a very small clipping of baby's breath or other dried flowers as a centerpiece.