

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Neighbour Rosicky by Willa Cather

Book Information

Willa Cather, Neighbour Rosicky

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Interest Level: UG

A gentle, hard-working farmer's zest for life touches all who know him.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Emotions, Love; Family Life, Death; Places, Farms; Series, Creative Short Stories; Short Stories, Short Stories (All)

Main Characters

Anton Rosicky the principal character of the story; a kind-hearted, optimistic man who left Bohemia and, after enduring hardship in his youth, raised his family on the prairie of Nebraska

Doctor Ed Burleigh a bachelor country doctor who cares for the residents of the prairie and admires the warmth of the Rosicky family

Lifschnitz a poor German tailor who took Rosicky in for his keep while he was in London

Mary the welcoming, hardworking, and efficient woman who marries Rosicky and cares for the children and animals

Mrs. Lifschnitz the sympathetic wife of the tailor

Polly Rudolph's wife, a caring woman who is having difficulty adjusting to country life

Rudolph the eldest son who has recently married an "American" woman and rents land near his parents

Vocabulary

bob a short-styled woman's haircut

chaff to tease; to banter

indulgence delight, reveling

keep room and board

languid weak or lacking energy

reproach criticism, blame

Synopsis

Anton Rosicky learns from Doctor Burleigh that what he thought was asthma is actually a heart condition. Rosicky is told he must restrain from doing the heavy work of the farm to prevent his heart from failing. Doctor Burleigh feels burdened by the diagnosis since he is very fond of Rosicky and his wife, Mary.

On his way home, Rosicky stops to chat in town and then stops at the graveyard to admire its openness. When he arrives at his house, Mary inquires about the doctor's visit. She is concerned about the diagnosis and reflects inwardly on the goodness of her married life with Anton Rosicky and how she has appreciated his gentleness and city-bred ways. Together she and their sons try to thwart every attempt Rosicky makes to do heavy work.

As Rosicky sits in the house mending his clothes, he reflects on his youthful years as a tailor. It pains him to think of the years he spent in London working for a poor German tailor. He came to New York when he was twenty and at first enjoyed the city, but eventually he felt his life was empty, and he longed to run away to open spaces. He saved his money until he was able to buy his liberty and moved to Nebraska at age thirty-five to work as a farm hand in a Czech farming community.

Now, at sixty-five with five sons and a daughter, his main concern is Rudolph, his oldest son who has recently married an American girl, Polly. He worries that Polly will be discontent as a farmer's wife since she had grown up as a town girl. Rosicky wants to loan them the family car on Saturday nights, and his family consents to the arrangement. Rosicky drives to Rudolph and Polly's farm and persuades them to take in a movie, giving his son some money to court his wife. Polly is grateful but restrained.

On Christmas Eve, Rosicky again reflects on his years in London, living in a flea-ridden apartment with the tailor's family and another boarder. He puts aside his musings, however, to get ready for supper before Polly and Rudolph arrive. After supper,

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Rudolph expresses concern about the crops and hard times. Mary shares a story of Rosicky's optimism even when a corn crop was destroyed one year. Rosicky chose to enjoy what he still had by having a picnic instead of wallowing in misery. Rosicky then shares a story about the Christmas when he was in London. He had eaten half a goose before realizing it was to be the tailor's family's Christmas meal. Rosicky went out to make amends and found some Czech people who took pity on him and gave him money. He bought food for the tailor's family so that they could have a Christmas feast. The Czech men later arranged for his passage to New York. This warms Polly to the family.

Although the winter is harsh, Rosicky reflects on the goodness of living on the land and being self-sufficient. He hopes his boys will not see the cruelty in the world that he associates with city living and industry. When spring comes, Rosicky notices the thistle plants had blown into the fields during the dry winter sprout. The boys are busy planting corn, so Rosicky decides to rake the thistles himself. While getting the horses to the barn after the raking is completed, he suffers severe chest pain. Polly sees him staggering and helps him to her bed. She lays warm compresses on his chest until the pain ceases. Polly is grateful for his recovery and, while Rosicky rests, Polly realizes that Rosicky holds a special gift for loving people. When Rudolph returns from the field, they take Rosicky home.

The next morning when Mary goes out to feed the animals, Rosicky's chest pain returns and, while crawling to bed, Rosicky dies. When Doctor Burleigh returns from a Chicago trip, he learns of Rosicky's death and within a few weeks goes to the farm to see the family. He pauses at the graveyard and realizes that Rosicky is probably content, lying next to his land in open country.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why is Rosicky so concerned about Rudolph and Polly?

Polly is American born and feels like she is different from the Rosicky family. Prior to her marriage, she had lived in the city and had a clerk's job that enabled her to have social interaction with people. Now that she is living in the country, she is experiencing loneliness and confinement. She and Rudolph do not have extra money to spend on entertainment. As a result, Rosicky fears they will leave the land to seek work in the city. He believes that the country life, although it contains hardship, allows freedom instead of enslavement.

Literary Analysis

How does the use of flashback enhance the story?

The use of flashback adds to the complexity and appreciation of Rosicky's character. In the flashbacks the reader learns of his hard youth, his poor days in London, and of his foibles and interests in New York. Rosicky's merry spirit is not the result of a coddled life, but grows out of hardship. He sees the ugliness in human existence, but chooses to be generous.

Inferential Comprehension

How might Rosicky's medical prognosis be different if he lived in the present time?

Modern medicine affords people many more options than in the past. Rosicky would probably have undergone many tests rather than just an exam with a stethoscope. Surgery may have been suggested. If he would have cooperated with this protocol, he may have lived to see his grandchild.

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Constructing Meaning

Rosicky endures hardship and overcomes obstacles to realize his dream. What is your dream and how do you intend to get there?

Students should describe their aspirations and list some concrete ways they hope to achieve them. Usually attaining a dream requires sacrifice, and there should be some indication in the students' responses that they realize that reality.

language tapes from a library and bring them to class. Have them choose a language with which they are unfamiliar and listen to it. See if they can understand any conversation. Listening to such a tape, even for a short time, is usually exhausting. Encourage the students to describe what they might feel if they lived alone in that country and were surrounded by that language.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors *Neighbour*

Rosicky, makes reference to the styles of the early twentieth century. Have the students look up the fashions of the times and sketch some examples of dress and hairstyles for both the ladies and the men. Try to find some pictures of Eastern European immigrants of the same time period. Compare their dress with the new American styles of the times.

Making Predictions The winter on the prairie had been dry and Rosicky's sons are forced to plow the wheat fields and plant corn. This may be the first sign of the impending Dust Bowl and the coming Great Depression. Have the students learn about this era in American history and write what they predict will happen to the Rosicky family during this time.

Recognizing Details Doctor Burleigh admonishes Rosicky to avoid performing certain heavy work on the farm because of his heart. Have the students look through the narrative again and list the jobs and machinery mentioned. If possible, arrange for a visit to a farm or farm implement supply business, with the purpose of learning all that is involved in farming, from field work to machine maintenance, planning to record keeping. After the trip, discuss how their perspectives may have changed about farm life.

Responding to Literature Rosicky reflects about his time in London as a time of loneliness when a foreign language surrounded him. He was delighted when he heard a fellow countryman. As an exercise in immersion, check out foreign