

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Curate's Awakening by George MacDonald

Book Information

George MacDonald, The Curate's Awakening
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With deep sincerity and commitment, young Thomas accepts the responsibility of his first parish, but he is shaken to the depths by a challenging question.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Emotions, Fear; Emotions, Love; Family Life, Sisters; Mysteries, Murder; Places, Churches/Missions

Main Characters

Emmeline the young woman who is murdered by Leopold

George Bascombe a man who does not believe in the existence of God; he challenges others who do believe

Helen Lingard a twenty-three-year-old woman who begins her voyage of self-discovery after she learns her brother murdered a woman

Joseph Polwarth Wingfold's spiritual guide in his journey to find the truth about Jesus Christ

Leopold Lingard Helen's younger brother, who murders Emmeline

Mr. Drew the draper who befriends Wingfold and Polwarth

Mr. Hooker the magistrate who believes Leopold is insane

Mrs. Drew Emmeline's mother, who is discovered to be Mr. Drew's estranged wife

Mrs. Ramshorn Helen's aunt, a religious but self-righteous woman who believes she is superior to Wingfold and Polwarth

Rachel Polwarth Joseph's niece

Thomas Wingfold a curate, or minister, whose beliefs about God and religion are challenged by George Bascombe

Vocabulary

Christian one who believes in and lives according to the teachings of Jesus Christ

curate a low-ranking clergyman who is in charge of a parish

disciple a person who subscribes to the teachings of a master and spreads the teachings to others

ecclesiastical having to do with a church

heathen one who is considered irreligious

New Testament a part of the Bible which includes the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Epistles

Pharisee a member of an ancient group of Jewish leaders who were noted for their strict observance of Jewish law; in modern times, a label applied to someone who is a self-righteous hypocrite

pulpit a raised platform used in religious services

Socinian a member of a sect that denied the divinity of Jesus Christ

Synopsis

One November evening, Mrs. Ramshorn, the widow of a deacon of the Church of England, holds a dinner party. Her guests include her niece Helen Lingard, her nephew George Bascombe, and the local minister, or curate, Thomas Wingfold. After dinner, George, an avowed atheist, asks Wingfold if he really believes the sermons he preaches every Sunday. Wingfold is dumbfounded. George's comment confuses him and causes him to question his own beliefs. Wingfold becomes uncomfortable with his profession and considers resigning. Weeks pass, and Sunday after Sunday, Wingfold continues to preach sermons that had been left to him by his uncle, who had also been a minister.

One day, Wingfold receives a letter from Joseph Polwarth, a gatekeeper at a local estate. It states that he is aware that Wingfold's sermons plagiarize Jeremy Taylor's writings. It is only then Wingfold realizes that his uncle had plagiarized Taylor's works. He then realizes his sin in deceiving the people of his parish. Anxious to explain himself, Wingfold visits Polwarth. Wingfold and Polwarth

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begin a very close friendship that focuses on Wingfold's search for the existence of God. The next Sunday, Wingfold confesses both his plagiarism and lack of faith to his congregation. Many are shocked, yet some, including Helen and even George, are impressed that the man is so truthful.

Several months later, Helen's younger brother Leopold comes to her bedroom window late at night. Leopold says that he has killed someone. Helen, who loves her brother more than anyone else, hides him in an abandoned house nearby. Leopold explains that in a jealous rage, he had stabbed and killed Emmeline, a woman whom he loved, but who had only used his affections to satisfy her ego. Soon Leopold develops a serious fever, and Helen is forced to bring him to her own house to provide better care for him. They send for the new doctor, but while Leopold slowly improves, he does not completely recover.

Meanwhile, Polwarth tells Wingfold that he had noticed something strange happening in the abandoned house and gives him a knife sheath he had found there. The rest of the week, Thomas thinks about Helen and begins to make a connection between the anguish he has seen on her face, her brother's illness, and the knife sheath. He is convinced that she must be hiding a terrible secret. He preaches a sermon the following Sunday in which he encourages his people to respond to Jesus' invitation to "Come unto me, all you that are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest...." The message touches her deeply, and on Tuesday morning, Thomas receives a letter from Helen asking him to meet with her. The two meet at Polwarth's house. She explains her problem in a disguised way, and Wingfold responds by telling Helen that confession will help the person she is concerned about. Helen is insistent on protecting her brother and is angry at Wingfold's suggestion that Leopold confess.

Leopold then asks Helen to bring Wingfold to see him. Helen asks Wingfold to come, and Wingfold agrees but realizes she does not trust him enough to reveal the whole truth to him. At this point, to prove

his trustworthiness, Thomas shows Helen the sheath. Helen is shocked, but she brings the curate to her brother. Leopold is relieved to tell someone else about his sin, and the curate's visit gives Leopold some comfort. Wingfold returns with Polwarth for more counsel, and Leopold quickly realizes that he must surrender himself to the legal system in order to demonstrate true repentance before God.

On Saturday, George visits Leopold. Leopold tells George his story of the murder, but George is convinced the boy is insane. Several days later, George takes Leopold to tell his story to Mr. Hooker, a judge whom George has already persuaded to consider Leopold's confession the mere rantings of a madman who must be humored until he regains his senses. Hooker plays along and sends Leopold home, supposedly to regain his health before he faces trial.

However, during Leopold's recounting of the tale to Hooker, George actually begins to believe Leopold's story. He realizes that the boy may really have murdered Emmeline. George travels to the deceased girl's hometown and finds Leopold's mask in a coal shaft, just where the boy said he had murdered Emmeline. In the meantime, Emmeline's mother comes to Glaston to seek her daughter's killer. She sees Leopold and is convinced he is the murderer. Thomas follows the woman into town where he discovers that she is the estranged wife of a friend, and that she is a bigamist. When Thomas confronts her about this, the woman agrees to leave Leopold alone in exchange for her crime not being revealed.

Soon, Leopold dies from his illness in the presence of his two friends, Wingfold and Polwarth, and his sister Helen. Helen is devastated by her brother's death. She then realizes that Wingfold and Polwarth really were friends to her brother. After overhearing a conversation between them about life after death, she realizes her emptiness and her need to find answers to questions about God.

That Sunday after dinner, George tells Helen that he

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loves her. Helen explains that she is in need of God, and, therefore, she could not marry a man like him, who has totally rejected God. The next day, Wingfold enters the church and finds Helen singing. Helen apologizes for having treated him so poorly. She then asks to become his pupil. Wingfold tells her he can teach her nothing, but says he can show her where he found what has changed his life, and the two walk arm in arm to Helen's house.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

George Bascombe is convinced that there is no God. He is so sure of his conviction that he assails other people with his beliefs. In your opinion, why does George feel this way when much of his family is religious?

George considers himself a man of science. He believes only in that which can be verified by methods of observation. He thinks that the spiritual element of man is surely a work of imagination and superstition. Therefore, since he considers God's existence impossible, he finds it impossible to tolerate other people's beliefs.

Literary Analysis

When the characters of this novel break free from their normal mindset and "awaken," they have similar experiences. What are these similar experiences, and why do you think they occur?

A number of characters in this book share the experience of an "awakening": Wingfold, Leopold, Mr. Drew, and Polwarth (earlier in his life). Each questions the nature of God, searches for answers and then, after finding them, makes a decision to acknowledge and turn away from sin and commit to God's direction and service. This life-changing event allows them to see themselves, others, and creation from a new perspective and with fresh appreciation.

Inferential Comprehension

Throughout the novel, the reader follows Wingfold's "awakening." Wingfold is inspired by George's probing comment to examine his true beliefs about God. Other characters in the novel have their own awakening. Choose one of these characters and compare that person's epiphany to Wingfold's.

Another person who has an awakening in the novel is Helen. In the beginning of the novel, Helen does not have many thoughts of her own. Yet, after dealing with her brother's guilt and later his death, Helen is forced to consider the nature of truth. She discovers that she needs to find God. Wingfold's awakening, however, is not forced by a violent act or a death, but by a question posed by a non-believer, George. Wingfold is forced to confront his beliefs about God and his duty to Him.

Constructing Meaning

Each character in this novel has a distinct personality. Which of the characters do you most identify with and why?

Each student will have a different answer to this question. Some students may identify with Helen because she has such a close relationship with her brother. Some may pick Thomas because he is inspired to seek the existence of God. Others may choose George because they enjoy controversy and do not believe in God. In addition, others may choose Leopold because they carry a heavy burden of guilt or have been forgiven of a great sin.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors George is disgusted by the sight of Polwarth and Rachel. At one point he states, "...but what right had he to marry and perpetuate such odious misery." His statement hints at the fact that he might be a proponent of eugenics. Ask your students to research eugenics. Then ask them to write a report on their findings and include their opinion about it.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning Throughout the story, there are several instances of irony. For

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example, in chapter three, George states, "If only there were enough like you left in this miserable old hulk of a creation." He mentions creation, yet he does not believe in a creator. Divide your class into small groups. Ask your students to find other examples of irony in the story. Then ask them to explain how each example is ironic, first in their groups and then to the entire class.

Identifying Reasons When Helen and George take a walk, the author writes, "To a Darwin reader, they must have looked like a fine instance of natural selection as they walked among the ancient cedars and clipped yews of the garden." Give your students a brief explanation of Darwin's theory of natural selection. Then ask them to write a one-page paper that discusses how the author shows sarcasm when he stated that these characters might be a "fine instance of natural selection."

Responding to Literature Both religious and non-religious beliefs are discussed in this story. Ask your students to consider their own belief system, whether it is included in the book or not. Then ask them to write about this system and include their own feelings about it.