

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Wolves of Willoughby Chase

by
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Book Information

Joan Aiken, The Wolves of Willoughby Chase

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Book Level: 6.5

Interest Level: MG

After two children are chased by wolves and their parents are lost at sea, they escape and travel four hundred miles to London.

Award: Misc./Other

Topics: Adventure, Lost/Abandoned; Animals, Wolves; Series, Wolves Chronicles

Main Characters

Aunt Jane Sylvia's genteel but impoverished aunt

Bonnie Green the principal character of the story, Sir Willoughby's daughter

Dr. Field the kind physician who oversees Aunt Jane's recovery and helps the children with their troubles

James the Willoughbys' loyal footman

Miss Slighcarp the evil governess recently hired by Sir Willoughby

Mr. Grimshaw Miss Slighcarp's accomplice and a forger

Mr. Gripe Sir Willoughby's lawyer

Mrs. Brisket the cruel instructress of an orphan school

Pattern Bonnie's loyal maid

Simon Bonnie's friend, a boy who lives independently in a cave in the woods

Sir Willoughby and Lady Green Bonnie's parents and owners of Willoughby Chase

Sylvia Bonnie's cousin and companion

Vocabulary

harridan a scolding, cross old woman

oubliette a dungeon with an opening only at the top

posset a hot drink of sweetened and spiced milk curdled with ale or wine

wold an uncultivated, treeless tract of land; a down or moor

Synopsis

Bonnie Green, daughter of Sir Willoughby and Lady Green, enjoys a privileged and pampered life at her family's great country house, Willoughby Chase. Meanwhile, Sylvia, Bonnie's cousin, has grown up with her refined but impoverished Aunt Jane in an attic apartment on a respectable street in London. Because Aunt Jane has grown fragile in her old age, Sir Willoughby has agreed to become Sylvia's guardian. Although Sylvia loves her aunt and feels miserable about leaving her, she is anxious to live in a fine house and enjoy her cousin's companionship. Bonnie is equally excited to have Sylvia come to live with her family.

After Sylvia parts with Aunt Jane at the train station, a strange man, Mr. Grimshaw, joins her in her train compartment. Sylvia is put-off by the man's aggressive friendliness and is cautious around him. When a wolf crashes through a train window, however, and threatens both of their lives, Grimshaw stabs and kills it, and Sylvia is filled with gratitude. At their journey's end, the train halts to a sudden stop, and Grimshaw's suitcase crashes down upon his head, leaving the man seemingly unconscious. When Sylvia and Bonnie are united at the train station, the plight of Grimshaw is discussed, and Bonnie insists the man be taken to Willoughby Chase to receive medical care.

Soon after Sylvia is welcomed at Willoughby Chase, Sir Willoughby and the sickly Lady Green leave for an extensive, health-restoring trip. Just hours after their departure, Bonnie and Sylvia's lives take a dramatic turn for the worse. The new governess, Miss Slighcarp, sets an evil plan into action with the help of her accomplice, Mr. Grimshaw. While the girls explore the hidden passageways of Willoughby Chase, they, through a peephole, see Slighcarp and Grimshaw searching through Sir Willoughby's documents, then burning his will. The wicked pair, confident that Sir Willoughby and Lady Green will

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drown in an unsound ship, plans on taking over Willoughby Chase. Slighcarp detests Sylvia and Bonnie and makes their lives miserable.

She fires all the servants, strips the nursery of its toys, denies the girls lessons, demands they do an unfair amount of mending, and enforces strict punishment when the girls cross her. When Bonnie accuses the governess of stealing her mother's clothing, the woman locks her in a cupboard and declares that Bonnie only be fed bread and water. Fortunately, two loyal servants, James and Pattern, secretly see to the girls' needs, clothing, food and, most importantly, give them solace. Matters worsen, however, when Slighcarp tells the children that Sir Willoughby and Lady Green have drowned and sends them to a school for orphans run by her friend and yet another accomplice, Mrs. Brisket.

At Brisket's school, the girls are treated cruelly. They, along with the other children, are overworked, underfed, and given merciless punishment. When Simon, a friend of Bonnie's, discovers her at Brisket's school, the two hatch a plan for Bonnie and Sylvia's escape. Eventually the three walk four hundred miles to Aunt Jane's apartment in London. There they discover that Aunt Jane is dying from malnutrition. When they seek the help of the kind Dr. Field, he helps nurse Aunt Jane back to health and takes a personal interest in the children's welfare. After Grimshaw is caught breaking into Aunt Jane's apartment, Dr. Field turns him over to the authorities. Grimshaw is exposed as a forger and is incarcerated. Later, in a dramatic scene, Miss Slighcarp and Mrs. Brisket are apprehended by the authorities at their school, Bonnie's former home. In the same scene, having survived the shipwreck, Sir Willoughby and Lady Green arrive home in time to witness the arrest of the two culprits. All ends happily. Plans are made for Aunt Jane to run a school for the orphans of Mrs. Brisket's school, Simon decides to live with Dr. Field while he attends an art school in London and, of course, Sylvia and Bonnie are home at last!

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Although Simon makes his home in a cave and lives in poverty, he is very content with his life. Why do you think he is content?

He enjoys living close to nature. He appreciates his independence and being self-sufficient.

Literary Analysis

If you were to be in a movie version of *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase*, what character would you wish to play and why?

Answers will vary. Some boys may wish to be Simon because he is fast, independent, and can use a bow. Many girls may wish to be Bonnie because she is strong, adventurous, and daring.

Inferential Comprehension

Why do you think Mrs. Brisket insists that the girls wear numbers and cut their hair?

She wants to degrade them to make them feel like prisoners under her rule.

Constructing Meaning

What do you think about the way Bonnie and Sylvia are treated? Are they too spoiled? Should they act more lady-like?

A wide variety of answers are possible. Most students will probably say that it is silly for them to be pampered and restricted because they are girls. Other students may point out that even though Bonnie can have anything she wants, she is a very caring person and does not act like she is spoiled.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* has a similar plot and theme to

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many other pieces of children's literature. For example, parallels can be drawn between *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* and *Cinderella*. In both stories, young girls lose all that they hold dear because of evil and conniving characters. Miss Slighcarp and the wicked stepmother are similar in many ways. In both stories, the girls are treated like slaves until justice is served and all is righted—good conquering evil being the major theme. Have the students read *A Little Princess* by Frances Burnett. In a class discussion, encourage students to compare the book's characters, plot, and themes to those of *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase*.

Ask students if they think a wolf would go to such lengths to threaten a human being. Ask students to research wolf behavior and answer the following questions: Are wolves a threat to humans? Are there any reports of humans being attacked by wolves? Where are wolf packs located today? Have wolves been misrepresented in literature?

Comparing and Contrasting Bonnie and Simon seem to be unlikely friends. Bonnie is accustomed to a privileged life, while Simon lives alone in a cave and is uneducated. In a class discussion, ask students why they think the friendship between the two is strong. Make a list indicating how the two are alike and how they are different.

Recognizing Feelings Throughout the course of *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase*, both Sylvia and Bonnie experience an emotional roller coaster. Both girls feel degraded and fearful at Mrs. Brisket's school. Sylvia is miserable about leaving her Aunt Jane, and Bonnie is heartsick when she learns her parents' boat has sunk. However, both are content, even cheery while they travel with Simon to London. When Miss Slighcarp and Mrs. Brisket are arrested, the girls feel relieved and then elated when Sir Willoughby and Lady Green arrive home. Ask students which scenes in the book they think are the most emotional. Then assign each student to write three journal entries written from the viewpoint of either Sylvia or Bonnie that relate to the events of the book.

Differentiating Fact and Opinion In *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase*, as in many fairy tales, folk tales, and other fictional works, wolves are presented as being a threat to humans. In one scene of *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase*, a wolf actually crashes through a train window, presumably to attack Sylvia and Mr. Grimshaw.