

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Black Beauty (Unabridged) by Anna Sewell

Book Information

Anna Sewell, Black Beauty (Unabridged)
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A horse in nineteenth-century England recounts his experiences with both good and bad masters.

Topics: Animals, Horses; Classics, Classics (All); Countries/Regions, England; Series, Scholastic Classics

Main Characters

Alfred Smirk the groom who replaces Filcher
Black Beauty the gentle narrator of the story; a horse who lives with many owners and experiences both good and cruel treatment
Duchess Black Beauty's mother; a wise and loving horse
Farmer Thoroughgood a compassionate farmer who restores Black Beauty's health and then sells him to his final owners
Filcher Black Beauty's groom at Mr Barry's
George Gordon the Squire's only son, who dies in a riding accident
Ginger an abused and friendless horse Black Beauty meets at Squire Gordon's
James Howard the stable boy at Squire Gordon's
Jerry Barker the kind-hearted cab driver who purchases Black Beauty at a horse fair
Joe Green the boy who takes James's place as the stable boy at Squire Gordon's
John Manly Black Beauty's kind coachman and groomer at Squire Gordon's
Merrylegs a wise and patient old pony who lives at Squire Gordon's
Mr Barry a gentleman who purchases Black Beauty for exercise
Mr York Black Beauty's coachman at the Earl of W-'s

Squire Gordon a kindly man who purchases Black Beauty from his first owner
The Earl of W- another master who purchases Black Beauty
Thomas Green Joe's father

Vocabulary

canter a slow gallop
chaise a carriage
farrier someone who works with iron to make horse shoes; also a horse veterinarian
ostler someone who works in a stable taking care of horses
portmanteau a large leather suitcase

Synopsis

In this novel, an adult horse named Black Beauty tells the story of his life. His young life is a happy and carefree one. Being a sensitive horse, however, he is acutely aware of the suffering of others. He watches in terror as a helpless rabbit is chased, then killed, in a cruel hunt. An unfortunate horse named Rob Roy is injured during the hunt and is killed. It is later revealed that Rob Roy is Black Beauty's brother.

Black Beauty is broken in and is soon sold to Squire Gordon at Birtwick Park. At his new home, he meets and befriends a distrustful horse named Ginger. She tells him of the cruelty and abuse in her past, but his gentle nature soon earns him her friendship and trust. Black Beauty is lovingly cared for by John Manly and James Howard. He also makes a good friend in Merrylegs, a patient and wise old pony. For the most part, Black Beauty enjoys pulling a carriage with Ginger, although it is difficult for him to accept the loss of his freedom and to adjust to blinkers that limit his side vision.

Later, Squire Gordon's wife becomes very ill, and Beauty devotedly does his part to fetch a doctor for her. In helping Mrs Gordon, however, he becomes very ill and barely recovers. Several years pass, and Mrs Gordon is ill again, so the Gordons move away to a warmer climate on the advice of their doctor.

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Squire Gordon sells Ginger and Black Beauty to his old friend, the Earl of W-.

At the Earl of W-'s, they encounter the bearing rein, a painful and unnecessary piece of horse equipment. For the first time, Black Beauty experiences harsh conditions and cruelty. Ginger lashes out against the cruel treatment, and the Earl's son takes her as a hunting horse. Neglect and mistreatment lead to an injury for Black Beauty, and soon he and Ginger are both turned out into the meadow where they can heal. Black Beauty is soon sold to another master, and he leaves his friend Ginger behind. He is let out as a job horse to anyone who wants to hire him. He finds a new master, but he weakens because he is not properly fed.

Eventually, he finds himself at a horse fair where he is purchased by a kindly man named Jerry Barker. Jerry drives a cab and is a kind and decent man with a loving family. Black Beauty comes to adore him, and they work very well together. The conditions for a cab driver are not easy, however, and Jerry must often work in the coldest of weather to get fares. He develops bronchitis and must give up his career. Thanks to a family friend, he is able to find another job and moves his family to a better place. Unfortunately, Black Beauty cannot go with them, so he is sold.

Black Beauty goes to work for a corn dealer and a baker. He faces cruelty and mistreatment such as he has never experienced. Even in the worst circumstances, though, he still does his best. Soon, the abuse takes its toll on him, and the once-strong horse becomes weak and withered. He is sold again and subjected to incredibly difficult work that he is incapable of performing. For the first time, Black Beauty wishes to die. He collapses and is soon sent off to be sold. He is purchased by a kindly grandfather, Mr. Thoroughgood, and his grandson, Willie, who nurture him back into relatively good health. He is sold and goes to his last home. There he is treated well and is reunited with the adult Joe Green, originally a stable boy from Birtwick. Black Beauty is content knowing he will live out the rest of his days in peace and happiness.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Near the end of the story Black Beauty states, "I felt that I was not the horse that I had been." Why does he feel this way?

Black Beauty has always been a good and strong horse. After years of hard, demanding work, however, he has become weak and damaged. His knees are bad from an accident. Also, he has changed emotionally. Early in his life, he knew only love and kindness. He has been exposed to a much different world than the world he knew as a colt. He has seen much greed and cruelty. The gentle horse is even taxed to such a point that he considers kicking someone after having his head strained in reins.

Literary Analysis

The story is told in first person narration by a horse. Why do you think the author chose this point of view? What was she able to accomplish by using this point of view that she could not have done by using another point of view?

Using a horse as the narrator is the most effective way to let the reader know just how terribly abuse affects an animal. The horrors done to animals become very real when the reader can actually experience an animal's thoughts and feelings about the matter. Plus, the rather matter-of-fact manner in which Black Beauty recounts such terrible events has a much greater impact on the reader than if the narrator were just a human observer.

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Inferential Comprehension

How can the reader see Duchess's influence on her son throughout the story?

She tells Black Beauty to never bite or kick and to keep up his good name. Black Beauty follows her advice and is often praised as being a wonderful horse. He has an exceptionally even temperament, and he is gentle and good. Even in the worst situations, Black Beauty manages to control himself. There are times when he feels anger and wants to kick, but he restrains himself. He also always does his best, even if a job is too difficult. He knows it will hurt him terribly to haul the luggage, but he tries nevertheless.

Constructing Meaning

The author uses sarcasm to help persuade the readers that abusing animals is cruel and inexcusable. What is sarcasm? What are some examples of sarcasm from this story? Why are they sarcastic?

Sarcasm is a cutting remark intended to create a negative meaning different from the actual meaning of the words. One example comes when Ginger experiences difficulty wearing blinkers. She states, "...these men who are so wise had better give orders that in the future all foals should be born with their eyes set just in the middle of their foreheads, instead of on the side." This is sarcastic because Ginger clearly does not mean this. What she is suggesting is impractical and ridiculous.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization The author creates vivid descriptions of the animal characters in this book. Black Beauty is a strong and beautiful horse with a white "star" on his forehead. Merrylegs is described as a "cheerful, plucky" old pony. Ginger is described as a "tall chestnut mare," and Captain is portrayed as stately and regal. Have students pretend they are casting directors for a film version of *Black Beauty*. Give them horse magazines and have them find pictures of horses they would "cast" in

their film. They can make a booklet, collage, or poster to show the class, explaining why they chose the particular horses to play each character.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Captain was an army horse in the Crimean War, in which many horses and men were killed. Black Beauty worked as a cab horse as well as several other jobs. Have students choose and research the contributions of the horse in other historical roles and write a short essay about it. Students can share their information with the class.

Recognizing Details The author explains in great detail the type of equipment used to ride, drive, and care for horses. She mentions bits and bridles, saddles, and reins. If possible, find a student, parent, or community member who knows how to ride horses. The student could bring a saddle and some basic equipment to class and explain what everything is and how it is used. Another option is to have students research the use of the equipment and make a poster to present their findings.

Understanding the Main Idea Many issues are raised about the mistreatment of animals in this book. Discuss some solutions to these problems. Identify progress made to improve the treatment of animals since the publication of *Black Beauty*. Choose and research a modern animal rights group, such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, World Wildlife Federation, Defenders of Wildlife, the Humane Society, or the Humane Farming Association. The Internet is a good source for information on these groups. How do these groups help animals? What have they done so far? What can we do as individuals to improve the treatment of animals? Write a one-page summary of your findings.