

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Scarlet Pimpernel (Unabridged) by B. Emma Orczy

Book Information

B. Emma Orczy, The Scarlet Pimpernel (Unabridged)
Quiz Number: 544
Penguin Putnam, 1997
ISBN 0-14-037454-X; LCCN
323 Pages
Book Level: 8.0
Interest Level: UG

The rulers of the French Revolution cannot discover who the maddeningly elusive figure is that threatens their power with his disguises, endless ruses and infinite daring.

Topics: Adventure, Rescue/Save; Community Life, Violence; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, NY Publ. Library Best Books for the Teen Age; Wars, French Revolution

Main Characters

Armand St. Just the brother of Marguerite, whose life is in danger when Chauvelin learns he is working for the Scarlet Pimpernel

Chauvelin the French security agent who sends countless individuals to the guillotine and relentlessly pursues the Scarlet Pimpernel

Comte de Tournay the French aristocrat who waits in France to be rescued by the Scarlet Pimpernel

Lady Marguerite Blakeney the wife of Sir Percy, who later becomes fiercely loyal and determined in order to protect him from Chauvelin

Lord Antony Dewhurst the son of the Duke of Exeter, and one of the Scarlet Pimpernel's trustworthy men

Mr. Jellyband the owner of "The Fisherman's Rest"

Sir Andrew Ffoulkes one of the Scarlet Pimpernel's courageous men who helps Marguerite save Sir Percy

Suzanne de Tournay the daughter of the Comtesse and Comte de Tournay

The Comtesse de Tournay the wife of the Comte de Tournay, who is rescued by the Scarlet Pimpernel and brought safely to England

The Scarlet Pimpernel (Sir Percy Blakeney) the very wealthy husband of Marguerite, who wears the guise of a fool in order to be inconspicuous when he rescues French aristocrats from the guillotine

Vocabulary

"A bas les aristos!" "Down with the aristocrats!"

citoyen citizen

cure friar or priest

ennui boredom

fichu scarf or shawl

impudent overly self-confident and bold

lacquy a servant or one who flatters for pay

plebeian a commoner

tricoleuses knitters

Synopsis

Because of the French Revolution, countless victims fall prey to the guillotine on a daily basis. The archrival to the Revolution is an unknown Englishman called the Scarlet Pimpernel. He rescues aristocrats from the swift death of the guillotine, and he brazenly sends notes bearing his insignia--a small, red flower--to the agents of the Revolution. There is a price on his head, and an agent named Chauvelin is sent to discover the Pimpernel's identity, capture him, and see to his death.

The Tournay family has just arrived in England, thanks to the intervention of the Scarlet Pimpernel. Comtesse de Tournay and her children safely await the rescue of her husband, who is still in France awaiting his death sentence. We are soon introduced to Sir Percy Blakeney and his beautiful wife, Marguerite (formerly St. Just). It appears that Sir Percy is very handsome, but slow-witted and foolish. Marguerite even holds him in contempt. The Comtesse despises Marguerite for the role she played in the death of the St. Cyr family.

Meanwhile, Chauvelin and his henchmen assault Lord Antony and Sir Andrew and are able to steal

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some papers containing the Pimpernel's itinerary. The papers reveal Armand St. Just, Marguerite's beloved brother, is in league with the Pimpernel. Chauvelin, outraged, confronts Marguerite at the opera and demands her help in discovering the Pimpernel's identity. If she refuses, he promises her brother will die in France. Marguerite reluctantly agrees to help him.

Later, at an evening ball, Marguerite manages to glance at a note from Sir Andrew. It states that the Pimpernel himself will be in the supper room at precisely one o'clock. She tells Chauvelin and he goes there to discover the Pimpernel's identity. The only person in the room, however, is Sir Percy, fast asleep on the sofa.

Sir Percy and Marguerite return to their estate. Sir Percy appears quite cold and bitter, for he knows that his wife feels contempt for him. He knows she thinks he is stupid, and he will no longer worship her. It is clear he still loves her and Marguerite begins to feel guilty. He started acting differently toward her after he discovered that Marguerite played an accidental hand in the death of the Marquis de St. Cyr and his family. Marguerite confides to Percy that Armand is in trouble, and he vows to help him. That night, he leaves on what he claims is a business trip.

Later, Marguerite searches Sir Percy's study, where she finds a ring with a flower on it -- a scarlet pimpernel. She suspects her husband might be the elusive Pimpernel. While visiting with Suzanne, she receives a letter from Chauvelin that incriminates Armand. She then realizes that Chauvelin knows Sir Percy is the Pimpernel and is after him. She enlists the help of Sir Andrew, and together they go to France to try to warn Sir Percy.

A suspenseful episode follows in France when Marguerite attempts to get to Pere Blanchard's hut to warn Sir Percy. Chauvelin finds her and takes her prisoner. She knows her brother and the Comte de Tournay are inside the hut waiting for the Pimpernel to rescue them. She also knows screaming may be the only way to warn her husband, but Chauvelin

threatens to kill Armand if she screams. She does so anyway, and Chauvelin's men attack the hut but find it empty. The Pimpernel is at the scene in disguise as a poor Jewish man, and he has been aware of everything. The Comte and Armand escape safely to Sir Percy's yacht, and Marguerite and Sir Percy are reunited. They return to England very much in love.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

At the novel's beginning, Marguerite is a rather selfish and uncaring person. By the novel's end, she is devoted, fearless, and ready to lay her life on the line if necessary. What are some of the reasons for the changes in Marguerite?

Most importantly, the change in her occurs when she realizes that, although Sir Percy still loves her, he will never be her slave, and he will no longer blindly worship her. Also, the guilt she feels over her inadvertent role in the St. Cyr family deaths may have helped her to change. When she realizes Sir Percy is the Scarlet Pimpernel, she sees the sacrifices he must make and "the mask he must wear" in order to save people. This makes her own problems seem minor. And finally, her desire to see justice served and save the Scarlet Pimpernel from the evil Chauvelin greatly motivates Marguerite.

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Literary Analysis

The author uses many animal descriptions when referring to her characters. Chauvelin is described as being like a "fox" or "snake". Sir Percy is described as a "turkey." Why do you think the author chose these particular animals?

Foxes are often thought of as being sly, sneaky, or crafty. Chauvelin is certainly sneaky as he skulks around, eavesdropping and gathering information. Snakes are generally thought of as evil. Forcing Marguerite to choose between her brother's life and the Scarlet Pimpernel's life is an evil thing to do. Also, his treatment of the Jew (Sir Percy) is especially malicious. As for Sir Percy, he acts foolish and rather comical. These are characteristics associated with turkeys.

Inferential Comprehension

Why did Sir Percy become the Scarlet Pimpernel?

One reason may be that it is likely the events which altered Sir Percy's feelings for his wife also played a part in his decision to become the Scarlet Pimpernel. He was so appalled that his wife had a hand in the death of the St. Cyr family that he may have tried to right that wrong by rescuing people from the guillotine. It may also have resulted from his childhood. Sir Percy spent much of his childhood traveling abroad and gaining an international perspective of the world. When his parents died and he inherited a great fortune, he probably wished to do something useful with his money and started this dangerous game for the English nobility.

Constructing Meaning

Is Marguerite to be blamed for either the death of the St. Cyr family or for the trouble caused to the Scarlet Pimpernel? Support your answer with references to the book.

Most students will say she is not. In the case of the St. Cyrs, although she was angry with the Marquis for hurting her brother, she had no desire for his or his family's death. Although she did accuse the Marquis of treason, she had no idea that it would bring about his death. As far as helping Chauvelin track the Scarlet Pimpernel, again she is blameless because she really had no choice. At the time, she did not know the Pimpernel was her husband, and though she felt horrible to betray him, she had to save her brother's life. Chauvelin was entirely responsible for that. Other students may blame Marguerite for being too self-absorbed to notice that her husband is the Scarlet Pimpernel and too naive to realize the consequences of the actions.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Madame la Guillotine is the not-so-affectionate nickname the characters in *The Scarlet Pimpernel* give to France's chief instrument of execution -- the guillotine. Have students research the guillotine. They can then give either an oral or written report on why it was invented and what impact it had on the French Revolution.

Comparing and Contrasting After reading *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, have students watch a film version of the novel, such as the 1982 London Film Productions version with Anthony Andrews and Jane Seymour. Have students compare the novel to the film. What are the similarities? What are the differences? How do the differences affect the story? Do they improve the story, or do they confuse or detract? Have students critique the performances and decide which actor does the best job at portraying his or her character from the book.

Understanding Dialogue Many of the characters in *The Scarlet Pimpernel* are French, and parts of

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the novel take place in France. As a result, the book contains many French expressions and phrases. One example is "A bas les aristos!," which means "Down with the aristocrats!" Others include "tete-a-tete" (private conversation or interview), "billet doux" (love letters), and "au revoir" (goodbye). It would be interesting for students to go through the book and find other such French expressions, then look in French dictionaries or language books for the translations. Have students share their findings with the class. It would also be a good opportunity to teach the students some of the most basic French expressions and greetings: Bonjour (hello); Ca Va? (How are you?); Je m'appelle... (My name is....); Merci beaucoup (Thank you very much.) and so on. Perhaps you could have your school's French teacher visit the class for a day to help out.

Describing Actions or Events *The Scarlet*

Pimpernel takes place during the French Revolution. To gain a better understanding of the novel, it is necessary to learn about the Revolution. Have students gather information on important events, dates, and people during the Revolution. They might research some of the following: the Divine Right of Kings; Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette; the discrepancies in the social hierarchies; the "taille," a tax mostly paid by the poor; the Revolt of the Aristocracy; the Third Estate; the Bastille; and the Reign of Terror.