

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Witch of Blackbird Pond by Elizabeth George Speare

## Book Information

Elizabeth George Speare, The Witch of Blackbird Pond  
Quiz Number: 98  
Houghton Mifflin, 1986  
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249 Pages  
Book Level: 5.7  
Interest Level: MG

Puritan neighbors regard Kit Tyler with suspicion, fear, and anger when she befriends an old woman accused of witchcraft.

**Award:** Newbery Medal

**Topics:** History, American/U.S. History;  
Horror/Thriller, Witches/Warlocks; Power  
Lessons Vocabulary, Grades 4-6;  
Recommended Reading, California  
Recommended Lit., English, 6-8

## Main Characters

Captain Samuel Talcott Magistrate from Wethersfield to the General Court of Connecticut  
Goodwife Cruff a woman who believes her daughter is a simpleton and who is determined to prove that Kit is a witch  
John Holbrook a young man who comes to Wethersfield to study the Puritan ministry and who is an admirer of Mercy's  
Judith Wood Mercy's sister, a beautiful girl who spends considerable time thinking about marriage  
Katherine (Kit) Tyler the principal character in the story; a young woman who moves from Barbados to live with her aunt and uncle in Connecticut  
Matthew Wood Rachel's husband, a staunch Puritan who demands a lot from his family  
Mercy Wood Rachel and Matthew's oldest daughter, whose leg became crippled after a childhood illness  
Mr. Eleazer Kimberley the schoolmaster  
Nathaniel (Nat) Eaton the captain's son, whom Kit meets on her voyage from Barbados and later agrees to marry  
Prudence Cruff Goodwife Cruff's daughter, who admires Kit and who blossoms with Kit's friendship and Hannah's love

Rachel Wood Kit's tender-hearted aunt  
Reverend Gershom Bulkeley John Holbrook's teacher, who is knowledgeable in theology and medicine and who is a staunch Loyalist  
Sir Edmond Andros the royal governor of Connecticut  
Widow Hannah Tupper a lonely, yet friendly old Quaker woman who has been branded as a witch  
William Ashby a well-to-do young man who becomes smitten with Kit, but eventually accepts their grave differences and marries Judith

## Vocabulary

**inveigle** to lead astray  
**ketch** a two-masted sailing vessel  
**paduasoy** a rich, heavy silk fabric with a corded effect  
**pinnace** a small ship or ship's boat

## Synopsis

Kit Tyler is a well-educated young woman who lived a pampered life in Barbados with her grandfather. As the story begins, she is on a ship destined for New England because her grandfather has died, and she is planning to live in Connecticut with her aunt and uncle, Rachel and Matthew Wood. Although her grandfather left Kit destitute, she travels to Connecticut with seven trunks filled with fine clothes.

During the trip on the "Dolphin," Kit becomes acquainted with Captain Eaton's son, Nat. She also meets John Holbrook, a young man who is going to Wethersfield to study under Reverend Gershom Bulkeley to become a preacher. Kit encounters Goodwife Cruff when she rescues her daughter's doll from the water. When Kit dives overboard to retrieve Prudence's doll, Goodwife Cruff is convinced that Kit is a witch. This is Kit's first indication that America may not be an easy place for her to live.

When Kit reaches the Wood home, they are surprised by her arrival. They open their Puritan home to her, and she quickly realizes how different

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her life will be. She spends her days helping with the chores around the house and farm, working harder than she ever has before. Her Uncle Matthew is a stern, hard-working man, and her Aunt Rachel is a kind-hearted woman with only a shadow of her former beauty. Their daughter Mercy is patient and kind; she was crippled by an illness as a young child. Judith, the younger daughter, is a beauty who seems to be determined to marry well.

At Kit's first visit to church, she meets and dazzles William Ashby. Before Kit's arrival, it was assumed William would marry Judith, but now he is courting Kit. Judith claims she doesn't care because she has decided she will marry John Holbrook, Reverend Bulkeley's student. Judith believes the purpose of John's frequent visits to their home is to court her. Kit discovers, however, that John is in love with Mercy, and the feelings are mutual. When John comes to make his intentions known, Judith misunderstands the situation, and suddenly John and Judith become "engaged."

In the meantime, Kit has become good friends with the Widow Hannah Tupper. Hannah is an old Quaker woman who lives alone in the Great Meadow, a place where Kit feels at peace. Hannah is also good friends with Nat, who brings her certain necessities and helps her around the house when he visits. The people in Wethersfield believe Hannah is a witch, and Rachel and Matthew Wood both ask Kit never to see Hannah. Kit continues her visits, despite their warnings, and she even takes Prudence there.

Prudence has admired Kit ever since Kit rescued her doll. Kit realizes Prudence wants to learn to read, so she takes her to Hannah's. In that private place, Prudence receives her lessons, as well as a healthy dose of love and friendship. She blossoms in this environment.

Hannah's tranquil world is shattered when she is accused of causing a terrible illness that plagues Wethersfield and has resulted in several deaths. Kit learns that an angry mob is out to capture Hannah, and she runs to warn her. They escape from

Hannah's home before the mob arrives and burns Hannah's house. When all seems lost for Hannah, Kit sees the "Dolphin" in the distance. She and Nat manage to get Hannah to the boat safely. Kit refuses Nat's invitation to join them on the "Dolphin," explaining that she must return to make certain Mercy is surviving the illness.

After Hannah's disappearance, Goodwife Cruff claims that Kit is the witch that Hannah has left in her stead. Kit is arrested and nearly found guilty until Nat appears at the trial with Prudence. Prudence proves that Kit is not a witch, and Kit is set free.

As the Wood household struggles through the long winter that follows, Kit realizes she isn't happy in New England. She breaks off her relationship with William and secretly makes plans to return to Barbados. Judith is heartbroken when John joins a militia and is held prisoner by Indians. William consoles her, and he and Judith begin to think of themselves as a couple.

When John returns in early spring, he makes his true feelings for Mercy known. A double wedding is planned for Mercy and John and Judith and William. As spring arrives, Kit realizes perhaps she doesn't want to return to Barbados at all. She discovers what she really wants is to be with Nat, sailing wherever he goes. When Kit finally sees Nat in the spring, he has bought himself a new ketch and named her the "Witch" after Kit. He "proposes" to Kit, and they go off to ask Uncle Matthew for his blessing.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Why did Nat put jack-o-lanterns in William's house?

*He was jealous of William's relationship with Kit. He knew the house was being built for William's bride, and that bride would be Kit.*

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## Literary Analysis

How does Kit change during the course of the story?

*She loses a lot of her pride and becomes a more caring and sincere person. She learns much about herself and what she wants out of life.*

## Inferential Comprehension

Why did Rachel marry Matthew Wood?

*She most likely admired his beliefs and his integrity. Although he is a gruff man, he deals with people fairly. He changed after losing two sons, and he probably had a more pleasant disposition when they were first married.*

## Constructing Meaning

Predict how Uncle Matthew will react to Nat's proposal to Kit.

*Uncle Matthew has grown fond of Kit and will be happy to see her with this nice young man. He may question Nat's involvement with the jack-o-lantern incident, but he will most likely give the couple his blessing.*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** Kit grew up in Barbados, far from New England. Although the reader catches glimpses of what it is like there, there is much more to learn. Ask the students to find Barbados on the map and to especially take note of the distance between Barbados and Connecticut. They should research the types of plants that grow there, what types of jobs the residents have, what people wear, what the standard of living is, etc.

**Understanding Characterization** Kit becomes more mature and discovers a lot about herself because she has been forced to move to a new location. In New England, she works harder than she ever has, and yet she has many rewarding experiences. Ask the students to discuss changes in their lives that have caused them to mature. Have they ever had to relocate? Did they

lose a close relative? Can they relate to Kit's experience?

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* is set in a time when some people believed in witchcraft. It would be interesting for the students to research the history of Salem, Massachusetts, where many people were accused of practicing witchcraft. What happened to people who were accused of being witches? What were the crimes they supposedly committed? Were the witches usually Quakers?

**Recognizing Feelings** When Judith misinterprets John Holbrook's feelings, John is trapped in a no-win situation. If he tells Judith he really loves Mercy, Mercy will never forgive him for hurting her sister. But if he marries Judith, he will never be truly happy. Has something like this ever happened to the students where someone misinterpreted their actions? What did they do about it? Was it an awkward situation?