

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Tom's Midnight Garden by Philippa Pearce

Book Information

Philippa Pearce, Tom's Midnight Garden
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While staying with his aunt and uncle, Tom discovers a magical garden and meets a girl from the Victorian era with whom he travels back in time.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Carnegie Medal/Honors; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Fantasy/Imagination, Misc./Other

Main Characters

Abel the gardener of the estate years ago, a staunchly religious man who cares for Hatty's welfare; he is able to see Tom when Tom visits the past

Aunt Gwen Kitson Tom's doting aunt who caters to him while he lives with her and Uncle Alan in their flat

Barty a friend of Hatty's cousins whom Hatty marries; they become Mr. and Mrs. Bartholomew

Edgar Melbourne the youngest and brashest of Hatty's cousins

Hatty Melbourne Tom's orphan friend from the past whom he visits in the garden each night; she is being raised on her aunt's estate and finds solace in the garden

Hubert Melbourne the oldest of Hatty's three male cousins, who are brothers

James Melbourne the kindest of Hatty's three cousins

Mrs. and Mr. Long Tom's parents, who decide it is in Tom's best interest for him to go to his aunt and uncle's home to avoid catching measles from his brother, Peter

Mrs. Bartholomew Aunt Gwen and Uncle Alan's landlady; she is thought to be crotchety and only comes down from her flat to wind the grandfather clock in the central hallway

Mrs. Grace Melbourne Hatty's aunt and the mother of Edgar, James, and Hubert; a cold and stern woman who allows Hatty to live on her estate as a charity case

Peter Long Tom's brother, who is quarantined with measles and receives letters from Tom about the garden

Tom Long the main character of the story, a boy who enters the past when he visits the garden of his aunt and uncle's building each night; in the garden he builds relationships with people, particularly Hatty

Uncle Alan Kitson Tom's uncle, a no-nonsense man who is caring but sets down rules and expects them to be obeyed

Vocabulary

barometer an instrument that measures atmospheric pressure

cinema a theater that shows films

desolate gloomy, deserted, and bare; joyless and sorrowful

gig a light, two-wheeled carriage that is drawn by a single horse

larder a small room in which food supplies are stored

mantelpiece a shelf at the top of a fireplace

oblong shaped like a round rectangle

pinfore a large, sleeveless apron with a bib and a skirt

reassure to relieve anxiety in a comforting way

resolved firmly decided

roused awakened from sleep

tenants people who pay rent to occupy parts of a building

threshold the point at which one enters a place

trampling walking heavily in a way that flattens something

unreliable not to be depended upon

Synopsis

Against his wishes, Tom Long is being sent to stay with his aunt and uncle, Gwen and Alan Kitson,

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because his brother, Peter, has measles. Tom is in quarantine in case he has caught the virus. His childless aunt and uncle live in an unwelcoming flat with no garden to play in, and Tom is sleepless at night from lack of activity. An old grandfather clock in the downstairs hallway arouses Tom's curiosity. Only Mrs. Bartholomew, the reclusive old landlady, touches it, and that is to wind it. The clock chimes on each hour, always incorrectly. One night Tom hears the clock strike thirteen and descends the stairs to investigate. He opens the back door, revealing a garden filled with trees and shrubs, a greenhouse, and twisting paths. Turning back inside, he sees a maid, who does not notice him when he speaks. The downstairs is now fully furnished, with the only familiar object being the grandfather clock. The other objects soon fade. Tom closes the door and returns to bed, vowing to return to the garden.

The next morning Tom questions his aunt and uncle about the garden, but they deny its existence. Tom opens the back door, revealing only a narrow, paved, fenced-in area. Disappointed, Tom tells Peter about the experience in the first of a series of letters, which he asks Peter to burn after he has read them. Peter keeps only a postcard of the Ely Cathedral Tower.

Each succeeding night of his visit, Tom goes out to the garden when the clock strikes thirteen. He realizes that he enters the garden at varying points in the past. Tom now wishes to stay at the Kitsons' because there are children in the garden he hopes to befriend. There are three brothers, Hubert, James, and Edgar, and their younger cousin, Hatty, who tags behind. Tom is invisible to all but Hatty, and they become friends. Hatty is an orphan who fantasizes she is an exiled princess. In truth, her aunt Mrs. Melbourne scorns her and raises her out of mere duty. During the day, Tom plans to ask Mrs. Bartholomew about the history of the house, but he is told she moved into the house just recently, after she was widowed.

Tom is adventurous in the garden because he can't hurt himself there. He is walking along the top of a high wall, with Hatty watching, when Abel the

gardener rushes to Hatty carrying a Bible and has her swear never to climb the wall. Tom has asked to extend his stay with his aunt and uncle. The Kitsons and his mother are surprised but agree. Tom catches a cold, which further extends his stay. Peter, recovered from the measles, wants to visit, but Mrs. Long refuses to let him. One day, while Tom is helping Hatty build a tree house, a branch breaks under Hatty and she falls, unconscious, from the tree to the ground. When Abel comes to help, Abel reveals he has been able to see Tom all along. Abel believes Tom is a devil and tells him to leave. Tom enters the house to visit Hatty, who is unhurt. She has the same bedroom Tom has at the Kitsons'. He asks her about the grandfather clock, and she promises to show him the inscription sometime. She shows him a hiding place beneath the floorboards. When Tom promises to return the next day, Hatty tells him that often months pass between his visits.

The next day Tom receives letters from Peter and from his mother. Peter tells Tom he is expected home on Saturday. It is winter in the garden that night, and Hatty is learning to ice-skate. She says Tom appears thinner, referring to his visible image. Hatty shows Tom the clock inscription, which includes the words Time No Longer and a quote from the Bible's book of Revelation. On Tom's next visit, it is winter again, but years later. Hatty comments on this and then asks if he has skates. Tom has an idea to prove Hatty's existence: He asks her to store her skates under the floorboards. When she promises, he leaves the garden immediately and searches under the floorboards, finding Hatty's skates. Hatty has left a note too, but the year is smudged.

Since time stands still while Tom is in the garden, he decides he can stay for as long as he wishes that night and still be ready to go home on Saturday. Tom does not write to Peter as he had promised, and Peter falls asleep that night thinking of Tom and the Ely Cathedral Tower postcard. Tom takes the skates to the garden, and he and Hatty skate from Castleford to Ely on the frozen river. When they climb the cathedral tower, Peter is there, and Hatty is able to see him too. When Peter sees Hatty, he

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tells Tom she is a woman, not a girl. He fades away, leaving Tom finally realizing that Hatty has grown up. As they begin to skate home, Barty, a young man Hatty knows, offers her a ride home. Hatty accepts, and as the two talk, Hatty ignores Tom. Tom falls asleep during the ride and wakes the next morning in his bed. Tom is angry that he hadn't stayed in the garden longer, but remembers he has one more night. But that night he discovers the garden is gone. He screams out Hatty's name. Back in their flat, the Kitsons try to calm him. The next morning Mrs. Bartholomew insists Tom come talk to her. Mrs. Bartholomew tells Tom that she awoke when she heard him cry out her name the previous night. She is Hatty Melbourne. She married Barty and returned to the house after he died. Over the past weeks, she has been dreaming about her childhood. Tom, needing companionship, entered those dream memories. The two talk all morning, and Tom promises to bring Peter with him to visit next year. They part with a goodbye hug before Tom prepares to return home to his family.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why is Hatty so excited about the tree house that Tom is helping her build, even though she has so many other secret hiding places in the garden?

Hatty's Aunt Grace has made it clear that she took in the orphaned Hatty only because of the claims of blood and what she calls a "mistaken pity." Although the garden is Hatty's and she is proud of her many hiding places there, she probably feels that she has no house to call her true home. Perhaps that is why she is so insistent on windows in the tree house: so that as "princess," as she calls herself, she can keep tabs on her kingdom and see the comings and goings of her cousins. The tree house is to be her secret alone. By her desire to furnish the tree house with dishes and the like, she may be revealing that she wants it to be her home and not just another hiding place.

Literary Analysis

James is the only one of Hatty's relatives who senses Tom's presence, and only once, although he does not see Tom. What does this say about James, his brothers Edgar and Hubert, and Aunt Grace?

James is the most sensitive of Hatty's relatives, and even though he teases Hatty, he always seems to come back to check on her. Considering his sensitivity, it may not be surprising, then, that he senses Tom's presence in his mother's room when he is inquiring about how Hatty is doing since her fall (pg. 140). Edgar and Hubert have never shown an interest in Hatty's well-being. Mrs. Melbourne's bitterness towards Hatty seems only to have grown over the years, and she shows a total lack of sensitivity towards Hatty. Mrs. Melbourne is concerned about her own self-interest and hopes she will not have to support Hatty for the rest of Hatty's life.

Inferential Comprehension

Why is Tom able to do more things in his midnight roamings as time goes on?

After Tom has visited the garden many times, he discovers he can stay as long as he wishes, since time stands still during his roamings there. At first, he seems to be just an observer in this new world. However, Tom gradually becomes a more active participant in the garden of the past. He discovers he can, if he wills to, pass through solid barriers. He can keep the inside of the house from dissolving when he cares about Hatty's welfare, not just his own. He realizes he can move forward and backward in time, although in general he is moving through Hatty's life chronologically.

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Constructing Meaning

At the end of the story, Tom discovers that Mrs. Bartholomew is not someone to avoid or fear. On the contrary, she loves children and hopes Tom will return, next time with Peter in tow. Have students tell about a time when they had one opinion of a person at first and later discovered they were wrong. What were their original assumptions about the person, and what happened to make them change their point of view?

Students should describe a person -- a neighbor, friend, teacher or relative -- telling what their original opinion of that person had been based on. They should describe the event or process which caused them to change their mind about that person, and what they came to believe.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Cause and Effect Peter has a case of measles and needs to be isolated. Tom is sent away to his relatives' home and is expected to be isolated from others as well. Because of vaccines, many students are not familiar with childhood diseases that may have affected their parents or grandparents. Ask the students to work individually or in groups and choose one of the diseases that they are currently vaccinated against and learn about the disease's symptoms, the way it was spread, and the steps people took to prevent further infection. Some of the diseases may include measles, rubella, mumps, polio, whooping cough, scarlet fever, diphtheria, and chicken pox. Have the students make posters about the diseases and give oral reports of their findings to the class.

Recognizing Setting From the description in chapter 5, have the students work in several groups to make drawings of the Melbourne property, with its house, garden, meadow, and other land surrounding it. Then, each group can display its final diagram and and group members can discuss the differing visions within the group that resulted in the final drawing of the grounds. Where is the tree house? Where is the river? Where do the geese invade?

Comparing and Contrasting The garden and house of Hatty's youth have changed dramatically from the time she was little. Urban expansion has taken over what was once countryside, and the river that once teemed with fish is now badly polluted. Suggest the students go to the library or local historical society to find some old maps and newspapers of the town or city in which they live. Compare these records with present-day maps and documents and note the differences of population, natural resources, such as lumber and animal populations, pollution, and other factors that may have significance in that particular locale. The students may be assigned oral or written reports of their findings.

Understanding Characterization Tom has a symbol for himself based on his first and last name. A tom is a male cat and since his last name is Long, he draws a long cat as his signature. He thinks Hatty should do the same and suggests she use a hat for herself. Ask the students each to come up with a symbol for themselves. The symbol can be based on their name or nickname, the meaning of their name, a favorite food or object, etc. The students should draw the symbol and explain the significance of it to the class.