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A Message to the Teacher of Literature

OPEN YOUR STUDENTS' EYES AND MINDS with this new, exciting approach to teaching literature.

In this guide, you will find reproducible activities, as well as clear and concise explanations of three contemporary critical perspectives—feel free to reproduce as much, or as little, of the material for your students' notebooks. You will also find specific suggestions to help you examine this familiar title in new and exciting ways. Your students will seize the opportunity to discuss, present orally, and write about their new insights.

What you will not find is an answer key. To the feminist, the feminist approach is the correct approach, just as the Freudian will hold to the Freudian. Truly, the point of this guide is to examine, question, and consider, not merely arrive at “right” answers.

You will also find this to be a versatile guide. Use it in concert with our *Teaching Unit* or our *Advanced Placement Teaching Unit*. Use it along with our *Response Journal*, or use it as your entire study of this title. However you choose to use it, we are confident you'll be thrilled with the new life you find in an old title, as well as in your students.



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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *The Bean Trees*

THE *BEAN TREES*, BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S first novel, was published in 1988 to wide critical acclaim. The novel won the Enoch Pratt Library Youth-to-Youth Books Award, the American Library Association Notable Book, and the New York Times Notable Book.

During her college years, Kingsolver actively protested the Vietnam War, marking the start of many years' dedication to social and political change. The themes of social, political, cultural, and economic injustice permeate the pages of Kingsolver's poems, short stories, essays, and novels.

The novel addresses the themes of fate versus personal choice, the role of men versus women, physical versus psychological scars, person versus society, class struggle, sense of community, abuse and neglect, reverence for other cultures, and motherhood and family.

And though her novel is clearly driven by topical causes vital to all of humanity, it is also an extremely character-driven novel that skillfully exists quite simply and beautifully on its own level and on its own merits. As a result, the reader cares not just about the issues but about the characters themselves.

Plot Summary

The novel begins when Marietta (“Missy”) Greer decides she has had enough of Pittman, Kentucky and wants to start a new life, and adopt a new name. She determines she will name herself for wherever the gas tank of her 1955 Volkswagen runs empty. Her mother, a maid for wealthy families in Pittman who has raised Missy entirely on her own, fully supports her daughter’s desire to leave Kentucky and serves as a loving force throughout her daughter’s journey of self-discovery. Missy becomes “Taylor” after coasting on fumes into Taylorville, Illinois.

After her car breaks down in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, Taylor stops to have it repaired and wanders into a restaurant to find something to eat. When she returns to her car, a Cherokee woman places a child wrapped up tightly in a blanket on the front seat next to her, explaining that the child is her niece, and asks Taylor to take care of her. The woman leaves Taylor, stunned, and drives away in a pick-up truck with two other men. Unsure what to do, Taylor stops for the night at the Broken Arrow Motel. When she bathes the child, Taylor discovers evidence of physical and sexual abuse, and ultimately decides to keep her. Turtle has not yet made a sound but desperately clings to objects and to Taylor, so she names the child “Turtle” because of her strong mud turtle-like grip.

The car eventually breaks down again in Tucson, Arizona outside *Jesus is Lord Used Tires*. Mattie, the widowed owner of the store, extends considerable kindness to Taylor and the child and becomes an important mentor and friend to both of them. She offers Taylor a job at her shop and guides her through the perils of motherhood. Taylor also discovers that Mattie is providing sanctuary for political refugees from Guatemala in the upstairs of her store. Taylor becomes friends with two of these refugees, Estevan and Esperanza, who fled their country, and lost their daughter Ismene to governmental kidnappers, as a result of the political turmoil ravaging their homeland.

Looking for a place to live, Taylor responds to an ad placed by Lou Ann Ruiz, a recently separated woman raising a newborn baby. She and Taylor immediately bond over the fact that they are both natives of Kentucky and single mothers. They form a close friendship, and a supportive family unit that enables each of them to succeed. Their neighbors, Virgie Mae and Edna Parsons, also provide support by taking care of the children.

Estevan and Mattie educate Taylor about social injustice and the United States’ role in sustaining the Guatemalan government’s tyranny. Estevan also tries to educate Virgie Mae about the ills of racism and the benefits of helping others, but her prejudicial ignorance prevents her from even wanting to embrace these concepts.

Surrounded by Taylor and a network of loving friends, Turtle gradually starts to feel more secure and begins speaking and interacting with those around her. Turtle’s vocabulary consists exclusively of words pertaining to vegetables and gardening. Her progress is tested, however, when she is at the park with Edna and Virgie Mae and a stranger grabs her. Though Edna is able to hit the perpetrator with her cane, and Turtle is virtually unharmed, the child regresses to her former silent, unresponsive self in the aftermath of the incident. Turtle eventually seems to forget “the bad man,” but Taylor has a much harder time letting go of what might have happened to the child and struggles with her commitment to raising Turtle.

As a result of the incident in the park, Child Protective Services is alerted and discovers that Taylor has no legal right to Turtle. Unless Taylor can garner consent from Turtle's natural parents, Turtle will become a ward of the state. After an initial period of resignation, Taylor resolves to do whatever it takes to keep the child.

Against Mattie's wishes, Taylor insists that she and Turtle will transport Estevan and Esperanza to their new sanctuary in Oklahoma. While there, they attempt to find Turtle's family but have no success so Taylor asks her friends for help. Because they look like Cherokee Indians, Estevan and Esperanza can convincingly pose as Turtle's parents in the lawyer's office and Taylor is able to adopt Turtle formally. Taylor takes Estevan and Esperanza to the safe house and returns to her life in Tucson, with Turtle clutching the adoption certificate and naming not just vegetables, but all the people in her family as well.



Character List

Taylor Greer – the protagonist and narrator of the story. Taylor, a young woman in her 20s, is smart, passionate, determined, and fearless. Her real name is Marietta (Missy) Greer, but she changes her name as she ventures from her hometown in Kentucky to start a new life in Tucson, Arizona. Along the way, she is given an Indian child (Turtle) in a parking lot in Oklahoma. Taylor eventually becomes a committed and loving mother, develops important friendships, and fights social injustice.

Alice Jean Stamper Greer – Taylor’s mother (“Mama”) whose husband ran out on her as soon as he found out she was pregnant. She is a kind, nurturing, and completely selfless mother, and it is her model of parenting that enables Taylor to embrace her new role in Turtle’s life. Mama makes her living as a housekeeper for wealthy families.

Foster Greer – Taylor’s father and Alice Jean’s ex-husband.

Mr. Hughes Walter – Taylor’s science teacher from up north who gets Taylor her first job through his wife Lynda, the head nurse at Pittman County Hospital.

Newt Hardbine – a classmate of Taylor’s who fails several grades and ends up dead at the hospital Taylor works at after a fight with his father.

Mr. Hardbine – Newt Hardbine’s father. After a tractor tire blows up, he is thrown over the Standard Oil sign and from that point forward, Taylor is terrified of tires.

Jolene Shanks Hardbine – Newt Hardbine’s wife who ends up widowed with a baby to care for after Newt is killed in a fight with his father.

Eddie Rickett – the head of Pittman County Hospital Lab; Taylor’s boss.

Turtle – the Cherokee child (April) left on Taylor’s front car seat by the child’s aunt in a parking lot in Oklahoma. The Indian woman entrusts April to a stranger to help her niece escape the physical and sexual abuse she is suffering. Taylor names the child Turtle because of her tight grip. Through Taylor and her network of caring friends, Turtle progresses from being a frightened, almost catatonic, child to a thriving, cheerful, and self-assured one.

Mrs. Hoge – the older woman who works as a receptionist at the Broken Arrow Motel where Taylor and Turtle stay on their way to Arizona. She is a compassionate woman and lets them stay there free of charge because Taylor has no money in exchange for Taylor cleaning the guestrooms.