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Prestwick House
Literature
Teaching Unit
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Ellen Foster

by Kaye Gibbons

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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Ellen Foster

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. explain how Ellen feels about families and what a person must do to have a good family.
2. explain Ellen's struggle with loneliness throughout the novel.
3. discuss the characterization of Ellen as a smart, self-aware, courageous young girl.
4. demonstrate an understanding of a person's ability to determine what happens in his or her life, or luck's influence on a person's life.
5. define and cite example(s) of:
 - imagery
 - motifs
 - flashback
 - symbols
 - foreshadowing
 - euphemism
6. understand how Ellen is able to fight loneliness and alienation.
7. explain the way in which point of view and voice are used throughout the novel.
8. explain the conflicts that drive the narration.
9. discuss Gibbons's uses of narrative style and the impact they have on the story.
10. describe the purpose and effect of the flashbacks throughout the story.
11. explain how themes of love, rejection, and acceptance function throughout the novel.
12. explain the use of figurative language and rhetorical techniques within the text and how they function.
13. discuss the author's use of time as a plot device in the text.
14. recall the plot elements in the story and give a chronological depiction of the events without the insertion of flashbacks.

Ellen Foster

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Trace the mention of money throughout the novel. For each instance, explain the situation in which it is mentioned. How does it serve as a symbol in Ellen's life? Explain its use as a motif in the novel.
2. Explain the development of Ellen's belief about race. How does Ellen deal with issues of race throughout the novel?
3. Explain what Gibbons might be trying to tell the reader about who or what comprises a family in the section of text where the judge bases his decision about Ellen's placement on her grandmother's words.
4. Throughout the novel, the reader learns about Ellen's relationship with Starletta. Explain the relationship. How does Ellen change as a result of a relationship with Starletta, or does Ellen change despite her relationship with Starletta?
5. Even though this is not an autobiographical work, explain the impact of the first person point of view as Kaye Gibbons's life is explored through Ellen Foster. How might Gibbons have influenced the way in which Ellen's story is told? How would the story be different if it were told from a different point of view?
6. Compare and contrast Ellen's relationship with each of the mother figures in Ellen's life: Ellen's real mother, Starletta's mother, Julia, Ellen's grandmother, Aunt Nadine, and Ellen's foster mother.
7. Discuss the way in which Gibbons creates different layers in the novel. What are the different layers and what is the effect of their insertion in the story?
8. Evaluate the ways in which each of the characters who are involved in Ellen's journey play a significant role in Ellen's life.
9. Each reader will come to this text with a different belief about loneliness and a person's ability to change his or her destiny. Explain your thoughts before you read the novel about a person's strength to change his or her fortune, and then describe how you feel after reading the book.
10. Support the idea that "determination" is a theme of this novel.
11. Analyze Ellen's journey. Discuss the traits Ellen has that enable her to complete the journey. Describe the obstacles that stood in the way of the journey's completion.

Ellen Foster

Chapter One

Vocabulary

accumulate – to save up a lot
heave – to throw up
vengeance – payback

1. The title of the novel is *Ellen Foster*. What predictions can the reader make about the content of the novel based on the title?

2. Explain the effect of beginning the novel with the line, “When I was little I would think of ways to kill my daddy.”

3. Reread the first two paragraphs. Describe the narrative style of the novel.

4. Based on the language on the first page, what can the reader infer about the setting of the novel?

Chapter Five

Vocabulary

accessories – items of clothing that go with a particular outfit

bulk – a large amount

1. What does Ellen do when her father leaves for a day and night right after the funeral?

2. How does the reader know that Ellen is mourning her mother's death, even when she does not talk about shedding tears?

3. How does Ellen respond to her teacher's request to tell the story of her mother's death?

4. How does Ellen feel about Starletta?

5. How does Ellen's father spend his time now that his wife is dead? What happens as a result of this?

6. How does Ellen demonstrate that she is a responsible person?

5. Why do Julia and Ron move to the South?

6. How is Julia and Ron's reason for moving to the South comforting to Ellen?

7. How does Ellen celebrate her birthday?

8. What does Ellen do for Starletta when she is leaving the party?
