NOVELUNITS

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

Cold Sassy Tree

Olive Ann Burns

SAMPLE

READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

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TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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SAMPLE

Summary

While *Cold Sassy Tree* is meant to be enjoyed for its descriptive detail and its humorous anecdotes about turn-of-the-century life in a small southern town, there is more to this novel than pure entertainment.

Will Tweedy, a fourteen-year-old boy from one of Cold Sassy's finest families, narrates the story, which covers a period of about one year beginning in July, 1906, a few weeks after the death of Will's grandmother, Mattie Lou Toy Blakeslee. Will's Grandpa Blakeslee has scandalized the town by announcing his intention to marry Miss Love Simpson, a milliner in his store who is probably in her mid-30's and young enough to be his daughter, a fact which Will's mother and aunt find most disturbing since the whole family depends on Grandpa's extensive financial resources for their survival. Thoughts of a young stepmother—and the possibility of an additional sibling who might claim a share of Grandpa's wealth—drive Mary Willis to tears and Aunt Loma into a rage. They can only hope the wedding plans will change during the year of "decent mourning" which they assume their father will observe.

Will, tired of going through the motions of mourning, secretly goes fishing, and ends up on a forbidden railroad trestle just ahead of a speeding train His life is spared when he lies flat between the tracks, and his homecoming is marred only by the announcement of Grandpa and Miss Love—they have just come from the county courthouse, where they were married.

Will is asked to help Miss Love clear some of Mattie Lou's things out the house. As he talks with Miss Love, he learns that she and Grandpa have a marriage in the legal sense only: she has agreed to keep house for him in exchange for his deeding over the house to her.

Not long after the marriage, Miss Love is visited by her former fiancé, Clayton McAllister. Their passionate kisses are witnessed by Will and a nosy neighbor, Miss Effie Belle. Will wonders if he should tell Grandpa before Miss Effie Belle does. Miss Love explains the situation to Grandpa herself—including her instructions to McAllister to go back to Texas and forget her.

Before Will's mother can tell her father she wants to accompany her husband to New York on a buying trip, he announces that he and Miss Love will be taking the trip instead. To "show up" Miss Love and to comfort his wife, Hoyt becomes the first man in town to own an automobile—a shiny red Cadillac, which Will is soon driving around town with a self-important air. On one of these jaunts, he sees Lightfoot McLendon, a Mill Town girl he finds attractive, and offers her a ride. They end up kissing in the cemetery, but are caught by Miss Alice Ann, who lambastes Lightfoot for corrupting Will and reports his activities to his parents. Will is banned from driving the Cadillac for two months.

When Grandpa and Miss Love return from New York, Will learns Grandpa has bought a car himself—a Pierce—and has also arranged to become an automobile dealer. Grandpa decrees that Will is to give him driving lessons, but after the first lesson Grandpa gives up in frustration. When he and Miss Love plan an all-day motor trip, Will must serve as chauffeur. As he observes the couple, Will begins to see that more than a simple housekeeper-employer relationship is developing.
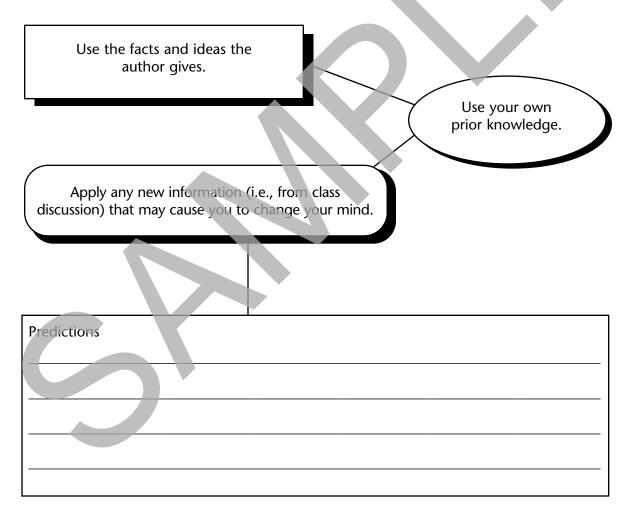
Using Predictions

We all make predictions as we read—little guesses about what will happen next, how a conflict will be resolved, which details will be important to the plot, which details will help fill in our sense of a character. Students should be encouraged to predict, to make sensible guesses as they read the novel.

As students work on their predictions, these discussion questions can be used to guide them: What are some of the ways to predict? What is the process of a sophisticated reader's thinking and predicting? What clues does an author give to help us make predictions? Why are some predictions more likely to be accurate than others?

Create a chart for recording predictions. This could be either an individual or class activity. As each subsequent chapter is discussed, students can review and correct their previous predictions about plot and characters as necessary.

Use the facts and ideas the author gives.

Use your own prior knowledge.

Apply any new information (i.e., from class discussion) that may cause you to change your mind.

Predictions

Chapters 1 - 7

Vocabulary

sloven 3	genteel 3	flustrated 8	beau 11
swanny 13	milliner 16	pea-turkey 20	taint 21
testimonial 23	beveled 25	tannery 27	diplomat 29
laudanum 30	suffragette 32	feisty 33	

Vocabulary Activity

Students will be able to understand many word meanings from context. In the list above, there are three non-standard words (swanny, flustrated, and pea-turkey). Have students pick out these words, find them in context, and define them. Discuss how they might have evolved. "Swanny" is used to avoid using the offensive word "swear." "Flustrated" is a combination of "flustered" and "frustrated." The origin of "pea-turkey" is anyone's guess, but it might be fun to discuss possibilities.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the narrator's name? *(Will Tweedy)* How do you know? *(first sentence, "…said to me, 'Will Tweedy?' ")* How old is he at the time he is telling the story? *(22)* What year is it now? *(1914)* In what town is the story set? *(Cold Sassy, Georgia)*

2. Why is July 5, 1906, an important date? *(Will's grandmother had died only three weeks before, and Grandpa has announced he is going to marry Miss Love Simpson, a woman young enough to be his daughter.)*

3. How do Aunt Loma and Mary Willis differ in their reactions to the engagement announcement? *(They're both angry and hurt, but Loma is much more volatile.)*

4. What is Will's opinion of Grandpa's plan to marry Miss Love? *(He finds her merry and likable, but can't imagine why she would be interested in Grandpa.)*

5. What happened when Mary Willis married Hoyt Tweedy? *(The Baptist deacons turned her out, condemning her marriage to a Presbyterian.)* Do you find this amusing, sad, or serious? Why?

6. How do you picture Queenie? What was it like for African-Americans in 1906 in Georgia? *(Although the Emancipation Proclamation had freed slaves half a century earlier, most southern blacks remained in low-paying jobs; whites naively assumed blacks were inferior, but happy enough with their lot in life.)*

7. What disturbing news does Hoyt bring home at lunchtime? *(Grandpa and Miss Love Simpson went to Jefferson to get married.)* What new light is shed on the scandal, from Mama's point of view? *(Mama fears Miss Love may have a child, then remarry after Grandpa is gone, causing complications with the inheritance of Grandpa's property.)*

8. What do Loma and Grandpa have in common? *(Loma married Camp despite everyone's objections to his family's illiteracy and poverty. Grandpa is marrying Miss Love over the objections of his daughters.)*

9. What is the attitude in Cold Sassy toward women who work? *(They are looked down upon, unless they're school teachers or widows without families to help them.)* Do you think that attitude was common everywhere in 1906? How has that kind of thinking changed?

10. What is Grandpa's store like? *(It's a big brick building, one of the town's finest.)* Who works there, and what do they do? *(Camp Williams, Loma's husband, sweeps and stocks shelves; Hoyt Tweedy, Will's father, keeps the books; Love Simpson makes ladies' hats.)*

11. Why was Aunt Loma especially antagonistic toward Miss Love as soon as she arrived in town? *(Loma was used to being the prettiest girl in town; now she had competition. Also, Miss Love had unintentionally insulted Loma about her flat chest and had refused to sell Loma a hat she was wearing herself.)*

12. Why doesn't Will like Aunt Loma? *(She has bossed him around all his life.)*

13. What did most Cold Sassy residents think about Grandpa and Miss Love getting married? *(that Grandpa had been "sweet on her" all along)*

14. What was Granny Blakeslee like? *(She was homely, agreeable, and well-liked. She did what Grandpa told her to do.)* Did Grandpa really love her? *(yes)*

15. What was Granny's last day of life like? *(She saw visions, finally realized something was terribly wrong with her, and died that night.)*

Supplementary Activities

1. Writing: Chapter 4 contains a lengthy description of Grandpa. Reread the description, and then write a similar sketch about an older person you know. Try to write in a conversational tone, as Burns did.

2. Dialect Journal: Throughout *Cold Sassy Tree,* you will find regional expressions. Set up a two-column journal in which you list the expressions you find on the left, and their meanings on the right.

Example

page	regional expression	meaning in standard English
7	"All y'all be nice to her."	Every one of you had better be nice to her
21	"…telephone hello-girls"	telephone operators