

Teacher Guide

Grades 3–4

Cousins

Virginia Hamilton

 **NOVEL UNITS**[®]



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COUSINS

by
Virginia Hamilton

Teacher Guide

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Note

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Please note: Parts of this novel deal with sensitive, mature issues. Please assess the appropriateness of this book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading and discussing it with them.

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Skills and Strategies

Comprehension

Predictions, cause/effect,
sequencing, inferences

Literary Elements

Genre, metaphors, similes,
hyperbole, dialogue,
characterization, plot, theme,
character analysis, story
mapping

Writing

Grammar, parts of speech,
usage, creative writing

Critical Thinking

Evaluation, compare/contrast,
supporting details, summarizing,
analysis

Listening/Speaking

Oral presentation, discussion

Vocabulary

Glossary, definitions, prefixes/
suffixes, context clues,
application

Across the Curriculum

Social Studies—genealogy,
migrant labor; Sociology—
alcoholism, grief; Health—water
safety; Science—dementia;
Community Service—visiting the
elderly; Art—mapmaking,
cornhusk dolls; Life Skills—
applying for a job

Chapters 1–2

Cammy visits “the Care,” the nursing home where her Gram Tut lives. Cammy jokes with her Gram and talks to elderly Otha Vance about building a hog house. As Cammy leaves the Care, she is soaked in a sudden thunderstorm. Cammy runs to her Aunt Effie’s house for shelter. While Aunt Effie complains about having to dry Cammy’s wet clothes, Cammy and her “perfect” cousin, Patty Ann, begin arguing. Cammy bursts out of the house and Patty Ann and Aunt Effie go charging after her. Back out in the rain, Cammy is relieved when her brother pulls up in his old truck.

Vocabulary

crow
murmured
hoarded
eagerness
quavered
suspiciously
ebullient
punch
rouge
blotted
wallop
downcast
abruptly
headed
thrust

Discussion Questions

- How do you think Cammy and Gram Tut have a close relationship? (*Cammy frequently sneaks away from home to visit Gram Tut. The attendants in the Care know Cammy and how much she loves her grandmother. Cammy and Gram Tut snuggle and play “pretend dead-as-a-door-nail,” a private game that only they share. Cammy kindly talks to Gram Tut, and nothing has changed since Gram had her own home. Lilac maintains Gram as much as she can and talks to her as a friend and confidante.*)
- Why does Cammy ask Gram Tut if she wants to help Otha Vance build a hog house? (*Cammy knows Gram Tut can’t do manual labor or even walk anymore. However, she also knows that pretending Gram can still do things—“part of the game” [p. 11], and Gram appreciates the sense of normalcy it inspires. Though Gram seems mostly aware of her situation and condition, she and Cammy both like to pretend Gram Tut is still able-bodied and independent.*)
- Explain what Lilac means when she says, “Gram Tut’s mind took a wrong turn...” (p. 10). (*Gram Tut suffers from dementia and frequently forgets things she is doing chores or cooking meals—things that she did in her life before but is no longer capable of doing. This also might refer to the fact that Gram has trouble talking, staying awake, or remembering things.*)
- What quality of care do Gram Tut and Otha Vance receive at the Care? (*Gram Tut and Otha Vance seem adequately taken care of—they are helped to bathe and stay clean and are allowed to visit other patients for companionship. Lilac seems more concerned with Gram Tut than Otha Vance, however. For example, when Otha Vance crashes his wheelchair in the hallway, Lilac calmly continues combing Gram Tut’s hair. But it also seems that such behavior is unusual for Otha Vance, as no one is surprised to see him in the hallway. Several nurses respond quickly to Otha Vance’s distress, showing that the Care is well-staffed and aware of its patients’ actions.*)
- Why do you think Otha Vance repeatedly crashes his wheelchair into the wall? (*Answers will vary. Otha Vance also suffers from dementia, so perhaps he is not able to think clearly about his actions. He could also want attention since he says no one comes to see him. However, he may think that he will be sent home if he gets hurt at the Care.*)
- Why does Lilac tell Cammy to “go home and stay away” (p. 21)? Why does Cammy beg to stay? (*Lilac knows Cammy should not be present without a parent. The nurses coming to help Otha Vance might not recognize Cammy—they aren’t regular employees, and Cammy and Lilac could both be in trouble. Cammy is hesitant to leave because she treasures the time she spends with her grandmother and knows Gram Tut will be upset when she leaves. Cammy also seems bored spending time alone until her mother gets home from work.*)

7. How are Effie and Maylene different, based on what you have read so far? (*Maylene works full-time and gives her children more freedom. She does not regulate everything her children do, and she is relaxed and pleasant. Effie is wealthier than Maylene and doesn't have to work. She expects everything and everyone around her to be immaculate. Effie fusses over everything Patty Ann does, including her grades, clothes, hair, and piano lessons. The two sisters are each other's polar opposites.*)
8. What does Cammy think of Patty Ann? Why does Cammy make mean comments about her cousin? (*Cammy thinks that Patty Ann always looks perfect and does everything perfectly. Cammy also thinks that Patty Ann looks down on people who don't have nice clothes, beautiful hair, and good grades. Cammy's mean comments about Patty Ann's family and appearance probably stem partly from jealousy, partly from spite, and partly from Patty Ann's attitude toward Gram Tut, who is Cammy's favorite person in the world.*)
9. What effect do you think Effie's attitude has on Patty Ann? (*Even though Patty Ann doesn't seem to have a problem with her mother's demands, she internalizes the issues by exhibiting symptoms of an eating disorder. Patty Ann obviously feels that she must be perfect in appearance and behavior at all times in order to please her mother.*)

Supplementary Activities

1. Figurative Language: Begin the Metaphors and Similes chart on page 12 of this guide. Continue to fill in the chart as you read the novel.
2. Science: Research dementia, a disease common in elderly patients. Create a brochure that lists methods of coping with dementia in a loved one, and share your completed work with the class.
3. Community Service: Create cards for residents of a local nursing home. With your school's permission, deliver the cards and visit the residents themselves.

Chapters 3–4

Cammy's brother Andrew defends Cammy when Richie, Patty Ann's older brother, teases her. While in the truck, Cammy realizes that Andrew has been covering up for Richie's drinking habit. When Andrew takes Richie to an automotive plant to apply for a job, Richie curls up on the ground instead of getting in line at home. Maylene reveals that she knows about Cammy and Patty Ann's argument. During the discussion of Effie's children and their problems, Cammy reveals that Richie, not Andrew, has a drinking problem. Andrew continues to defend Richie and is furious at Cammy for revealing Richie's secret.

Discussion Questions

1. Why doesn't Effie want Richie riding a motorcycle with Andrew? (*Effie thinks that Andrew is a bad influence on Richie and that Maylene's children are superior to hers. Effie also questions whether a 16-year-old should have a vehicle. She obviously does not think Andrew is a safe driver and says she doesn't want "her own son...sitting in a cheap truck, in the death seat" [p. 36] with Andrew.*)

Vocabulary Wheel

Directions: Write each vocabulary word on a piece of paper (one word per piece). Make a spinner using the circle below. Now play the following game with a classmate. (It is a good idea to have a dictionary and thesaurus handy.) Place the papers in a small container. The first player draws a word from the container. The player then spins the spinner and follows the direction where the pointer lands. For example, if the player draws a word and lands on "Define," the player must define the word. If the player's partner accepts the answer as correct, the first player scores one point and play passes to the second player. If the player's partner challenges the answer, the first player has a dictionary or thesaurus to prove the answer is correct. If the player can prove the answer is correct, the player earns two points. If the player cannot prove the answer is correct, the opposing player earns two points. Play continues until all the words have been used. The player with the most points wins.

