



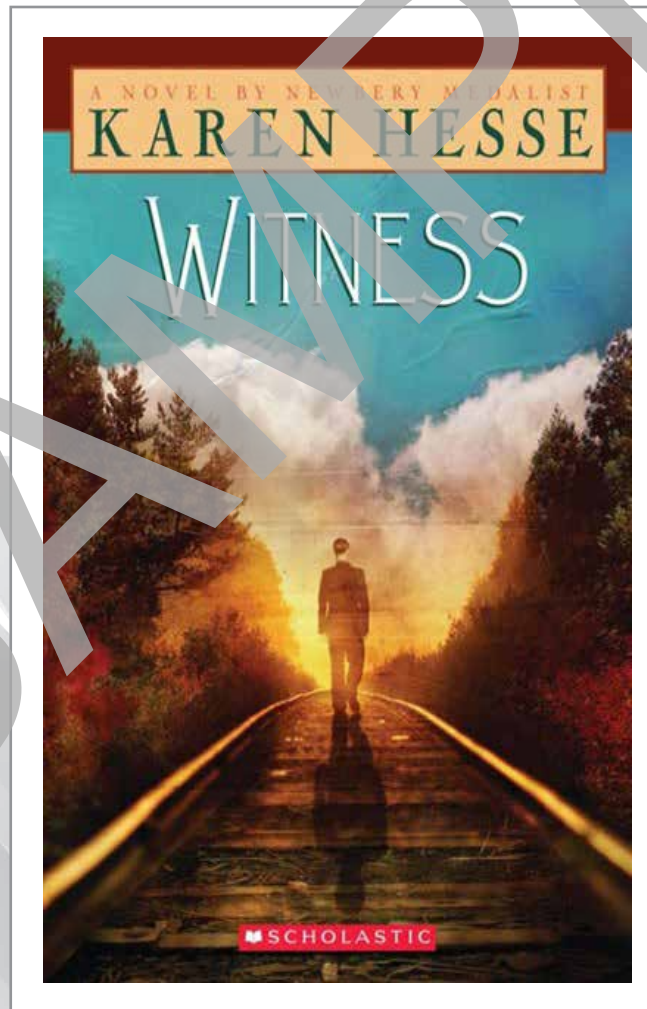
TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

Witness

Karen Hesse



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

Witness

Karen Hesse

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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Skills and Strategies

Thinking

Research, pros/cons, analysis, critical thinking, brainstorming, predicting, decision-making, compare/contrast

Comprehension

Cause/effect, evaluation

Writing

Poetry, review, essay, persuasive argument, dramatic scene, letter to the editor, letter

Listening/Speaking

Dramatic reading/acting, discussion, oral presentation, panel discussion

Vocabulary

Definitions, parts of speech, context clues

Literary Elements

Setting, conflict, irony, figurative language, theme, plot, point of view, resolution, genre, characterization

Across the Curriculum

History—1920s, Ku Klux Klan, court cases; Art—collage, painting, mural, poetry, drama; Music—John Philip Sousa; Politics—women’s rights, 1924 Presidential election; capital punishment, Literature/Media

Genre: free verse

Setting: small town in Vermont, 1924

Point of View: various first-person accounts

Themes: bigotry, justice, death, redemption, hope

Conflict: person vs. self, person vs. society, person vs. person

Tone: honest, reflective

Summary

As the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) invades a small town in Vermont in 1924, a wave of change begins to threaten the community's way of life. People take sides opposing or accepting the KKK's ideals. Accounts of inner struggle, Klan propaganda, racial and religious discrimination, and political life are brought to light through the first-person free verse of several members of the community, especially those of six-year-old Esther, a Jewish girl, and 12-year-old Leanora, a black girl who recently moved to the community with her father.

About the Author

After more than 30 years of writing, Karen Hesse finally realized her dream of publication, thanks in part to the encouragement she received from a supportive fifth-grade teacher. Her book, *Out of the Dust*, won the Newbery Medal in 1998. Though she enjoys reading, hiking, traveling, and music, writing is her passion, especially when it is for an audience of young readers. Hesse describes *Witness* as an attempt to "piece together a mosaic of a community giving birth to its conscience." Today, Hesse resides in Vermont with her husband and two daughters.

Background Information

After dying out in the 1870s, the Ku Klux Klan had a second resurgence in the United States in the 1920s. The KKK, a conservative organization that promoted the ideology of white supremacy, was regenerated by a Methodist minister and his following in Georgia who believed that the African-American community should be "put back in their place" in post-war America. The strong conservative beliefs of the KKK were appealing to many, particularly in the South. These beliefs included opposition to the distribution of birth control, the teaching of evolution in schools, and any effort to repeal Prohibition. The resurgence of the KKK included parades, conservative social agendas, and prejudicial actions against African Americans, Jews, Catholics, and immigrants. Violence, threats, and the burning of crosses became prevalent. By the mid-1920s, KKK membership reached approximately four million in the United States.

Source: www.u-s-history.com (active at the printing of this guide)

Characters

Leanora Sutter: 12-year-old African-American girl who lives with her father, Wright Sutter; mother died from a preventable illness less than a year before the story begins

Merlin Van Tornhout: 18-year-old man who becomes involved in the KKK

Esther Hirsh: six-year-old Jewish girl who recently lost her mother; moves to town with her father and lives with Sara Chickering

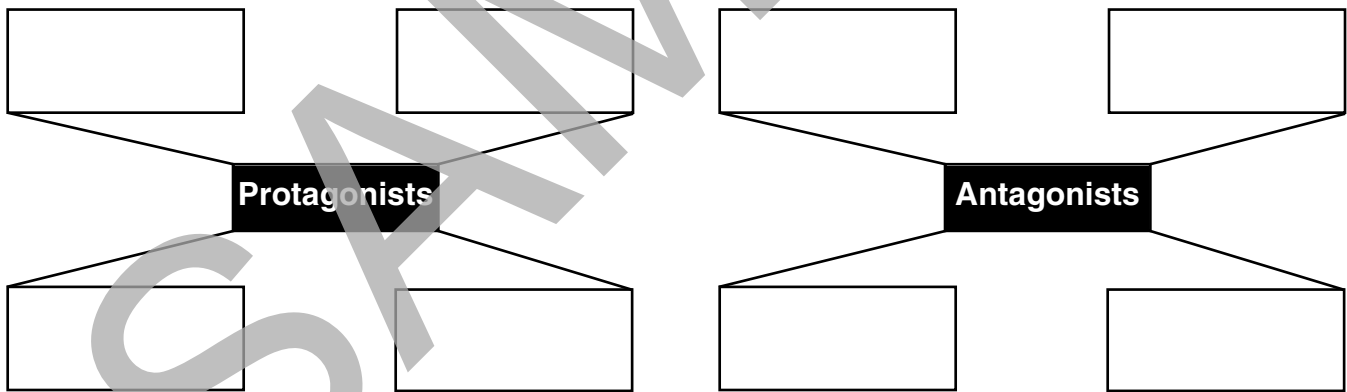
Protagonists and Antagonists

The main character in a story is called the **protagonist**. Sometimes we call the protagonist the hero or heroine (the "good" person). The character who opposes the hero in a story is called the **antagonist**. Sometimes we call the antagonist the villain (the "bad" person).

Directions: Think about stories you have read. Who were some of the protagonists (heroes/heroines) in these stories? Who were the antagonists (villains)? List some of the protagonists and antagonists and the stories in which they appeared.

Protagonists	Antagonists	Story

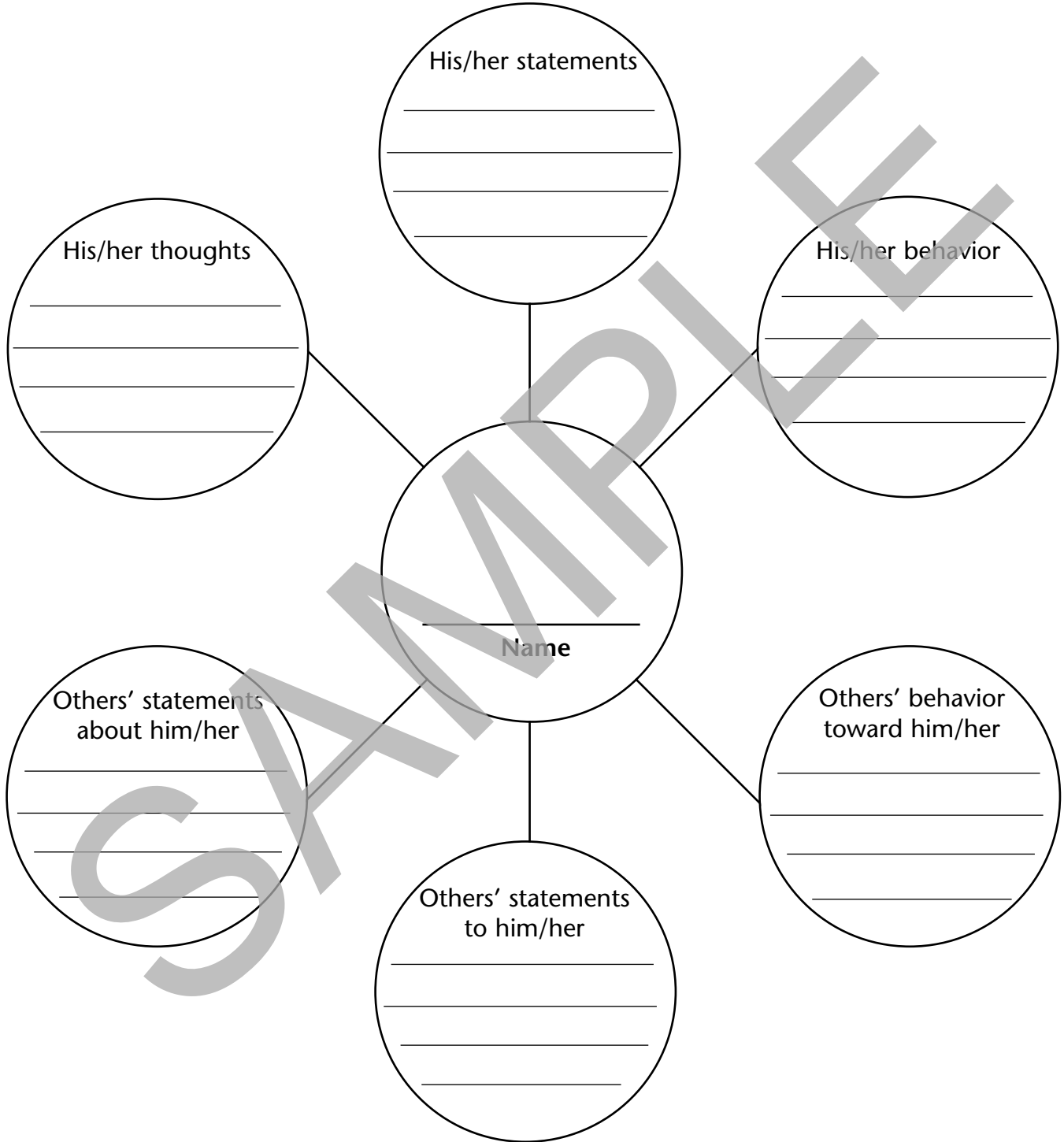
Complete the charts below by listing some common characteristics of protagonists and antagonists. For example, a protagonist is often brave. An antagonist may be cunning or cruel. **Sometimes the antagonist is not just a person but a belief or custom.**



As you read, decide who is the protagonist and who or what is the antagonist. Notice their characteristics and compare/contrast them to the characters you listed in the chart above.

Character Web

Directions: Complete the attribute web below by filling in information specific to a character in the book.



Act One, pp. 3–31

Several residents of a town in Vermont are introduced. As the Ku Klux Klan moves into town, people begin to take sides. The newspaper editor, Reynard Alexander, is neutral, while others such as Harvey Pettibone consider joining the group. The preacher, Johnny Reeves, who is portrayed as a heretic and bigot, seems most accepting of the KKK. Esther and Leanora are two young girls who see the bigotry directed at them in different ways—Esther is too young to notice, and Leanora is old enough to be angry about the racism she encounters personally.

Vocabulary
chuffed (4)
minstrel (7)
miring (8)
sanatorium (8)
inciting (14)
hearths (14)
customs (19)
gyrations (21)
wanton (21)
blissed (23)
impeached (28)
drudge (30)

Discussion Questions

1. What do you imagine this town was like before the arrival of the KKK? *(Answers will vary. Note that there may have been discrimination, but no formal way of voicing one race or religion's superiority over another.)*
2. What emotions do these poems evoke? Do you think the author intends to evoke these emotions? Discuss, using examples from the text to support your opinions. *(Answers will vary. Emotional reactions may include anger, disgust, frustration, apprehension, and joy. Note that different poems may evoke different responses. When discussing the author's intent, look at the word choice and tone of the poem. The author is strategic with her use of examples and tone so that different poems cause readers to respond differently. This moves the story along, as well as distinguishes the characters from one another.)*
3. Discuss the pros and cons of presenting the story via several first-person accounts. *(Answers will vary. Note that this allows for more introspection and more points of view, though it may take longer to piece together the entire story.)*
4. Identify the protagonists and antagonists of the story. What do you predict will be a central conflict? What makes you think this? *(Answers will vary. Protagonists—Leanora Sutter, Esther Hirsh, Sara Chickering, Viola Pettibone, maybe Reynard Alexander; Antagonists—the KKK, Johnny Reeves, maybe Merlin Van Tornhout and Harvey Pettibone; A conflict surrounding the arrival of the KKK is rising, shown in Harvey and Viola's conversations, as well as attitudes toward Leanora at school and the death of the Jewish boys.)*
5. Describe Esther Hirsh's life. *(Esther is a young Jewish girl who moved from New York to the small Vermont town with her father, who is a shoe salesman. It is not clear what happened to her mother, but she now lives with her father and Sara Chickering, who adores Esther. p. 5)*
6. Describe Leanora Sutter's life. *(Leanora is a young African American who moved to the small Vermont town with her father and mother. Less than a year before, her mother died of an illness after she caught a chill and no one came to help. People at school and in the community discriminate against Leanora, even to the point of not attending a dance recital in which she holds a role. Leanora is lonely and full of anger toward those who are racist, but her father tries to keep Leanora's anger from getting the best of her. pp. 7, 10, 13)*
7. **Prediction:** What role will Johnny Reeves play in the story? Who are the “foes” and “lambs” he speaks of on page 31?

Supplementary Activities

1. Literary Devices: The author uses many literary devices within the poems to convey her meaning. Setting, tone, imagery, and point of view all add depth to the story line. However, the author's use of figurative language conveys meaning through the use of analogy in the form of simile, personification, metaphor, oxymoron, or symbol. Begin making a list of the figurative language in the novel using the chart on page 7 of this guide. Examples:
Similes—"a whisper sound...like birds falling" (p. 17); "as old-fashioned as the paisley shawl" (p. 23) **Personification**—"fuming eyes" (p. 4); "teeth of winter" (p. 11); "quilt...spilling" (p. 12) **Metaphors**—Leanora: wild brown island (p. 7); "the devil...a colored preacher" (p. 14); "den of the devil...new york's harlem" (p. 16)
2. Characterization/Plot: Designate a half-sheet of paper for each character in the novel. After reading each poem, record your impressions about the viewpoint character and other people in the community.
3. Predictions: Begin the Prediction Chart on page 8 of this guide. Continue this activity as you read the book.
4. Characterization: Begin the Protagonists and Antagonists chart of page 9 of this guide. Continue this activity as you read the book.
5. History: On page 22, the author refers to "flappers." Research this term and write a report explaining what "flappers" were and the social ramifications of their emergence in early 20th-century America.
6. History: On page 28, the author refers to Miriam Ferguson. Research Miriam Ferguson and create a visual aid explaining the most significant contributions she made to Texas during her term as governor.

Act Two, pp. 35–61

The town is astir amidst reports of the kidnapping and murder of Bobby Franks, a rich, white, 14-year-old Jewish boy from Chicago. Leanora begins taking care of Mr. Field, a Civil War veteran who treats her with respect. Johnny Reeves continues to preach doctrine consistent with the KKK and gathers men to help him set a cross ablaze on the night of Independence Day. Iris Weaver continues to bootleg and commits to never join the Klan. Merlin Van Tornhout attempts to "rescue" his 15-year-old girlfriend, Mary, from an orphanage but is caught and jailed for kidnapping. He later helps Johnny Reeves with the cross burning. Someone threatens Sara Chickering for housing Ira and Esther Hirsh, but Sara refuses to be intimidated and tells the Hirshes they can continue to live with her.

Vocabulary	
brigade (40)	
sateen (46)	
wield (59)	
deceptive (59)	

Discussion Questions

1. On page 35, how does it seem the kidnapping of a 14-year-old boy affects Leanora? (*Answers will vary. Note that she focuses on the age, class, and race of the boy who was killed. It might be easier to fear that something so dreadful could happen to a young, poor, black girl if it could happen to a young, rich, white boy.*)
2. Leanora finds Mr. Field pleasant when she goes to help him. Discuss how Mr. Field treats Leanora and what role "dignity" plays in the way a person perceives him/herself and others. (*Answers will vary. Mr. Field treats Leanora as an equal, which*