

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Cold Sassy Tree

by Olive Ann Burns

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Notes

Cold Sassy Tree is the delightful story of life in a small, rural town in Georgia at the beginning of the twentieth century told through the eyes of fourteen-year-old Will Tweedy. Critics compare Will to Huckleberry Finn because of his humorous escapades and interesting perspectives on the world. The vocabulary level is not difficult; however, the story is long, and much of it is written in dialect. In addition, some students may question the way the author, Olive Ann Burns, portrays the African-American characters. It is important for students to remember that this novel is set in the rural South, forty years after the end of the Civil War. The role of the African-American characters in the story may be offensive in modern times, but is a reflection of society during that era.

All references come from the Delta Trade Paperback edition of *Cold Sassy Tree*, copyright 1984.

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Objectives

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

1. define vocabulary words from the text.
2. cite incidents from the novel to illustrate that this is a coming-of-age novel.
3. find instances of the following uses of language: metaphor, personification, foreshadowing, allusion, symbol, and theme.
4. recognize the author's use of satire directed toward organized religion.
5. point out instances of verbal irony or sarcasm in the story.
6. discuss the significance of the title as it relates to the conflict between tradition and progress.
7. relate instances of humor in the story and discuss how the humor entertains as well as illustrates the customs, manners, speech, and folklore of the people living in Georgia in the early 1900's.
8. discuss the extent to which Will is a reliable, believable narrator.
9. discuss the old sassafras tree as a symbol in this story.
10. cite incidents from the story to support the following themes:
 - It is important for people to find joy and humor in life.
 - Death is a natural part of life.
 - Ignoring the power of gossip, decisions about life should be based on what one feels is best.
 - The traditions of the past are sometimes destroyed as communities modernize.
 - People must not use appearance, social standing, or unusual behavior as a basis to prejudge others.
11. discuss the role of organized religion in the lives of the people living in Cold Sassy and the extent to which they agree with Grandpa's belief that organized religion fails to serve the needs of the individual.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. For each of the following vocabulary words, describe an incident from the story: lockjaw, trestle, suffragette, gelding, camaraderie, buckeye.
2. Write a dialogue between Grandpa and Will discussing any of the following topics. In the dialogue, Will asks Grandpa to clarify something about the topic and then Grandpa answers Will. If you can, write in dialect and include some of Grandpa's wit and humor in the conversation. Feel free to find specific passages in the story and paraphrase them. Doing this will help you to write the dialogue in dialect.

Topics:

- definition of faith
- how God feels about a person who commits suicide
- God's will
- Grandpa's views on funerals.

The dialogue might begin as follows:

Will: Grandpa, if I have faith and believe in God, will He give me what I pray for?

Grandpa: Having faith does not mean that the Lord is going to do what you want jest cause you ast Him to. The Lord ain't going to gar'ntee healin' of sickness. The Lord gar'ntee a spiritual healin'.

Will:

3. At the end of the story, the name of the town is changed to Progressive City. For what reasons is this or is this not an appropriate name for Cold Sassy, Georgia?
4. What does the sassafras tree symbolize in this story?
5. Cite three incidents in the story illustrating that some people living in Cold Sassy, Georgia, make decisions based on how the gossips might interpret their actions.
6. Blueford, Uncle Camp, Grandma, and Grandpa all die in this novel. Briefly describe what the circumstances are of each character's death and how each death does or does not help to illustrate the theme that death is a natural part of life.
7. List three examples of racism in Cold Sassy, Georgia. Which of the characters in the story sees the existence of racism in Cold Sassy? To what extent does Will recognize the existence of racism in himself and his family?

3. What evidence is there that the family both respects and obeys Grandpa Blakeslee?

4. Why do Aunt Loma and Mary Willis object to Grandpa Blakeslee's decision to marry Love Simpson? How does he respond to their objections?

5. Briefly describe Grandpa Blakeslee.

Chapter 5

1. In what sense does Will believe his Granny was a refined woman?

2. Who is Queenie? Why does she sing Nigerian songs?

3. In your opinion, is the following passage an example of sarcasm?

You have to understand that Dr. Slaughter was a fine physician. He had not only read medicine for six months under a doctor over in Athens, he'd gone two whole years to medical school up North. So if he thought Granny was dying, I never doubted it was going to happen.

Chapter 46

Vocabulary

buckeye – the seed of the horse-chestnut tree

- 1. Why does Lightfoot give Will her lucky buckeye?

Chapter 47

- 1. How do the robbers outsmart Grandpa?
