

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Ellen Foster

by Kaye Gibbons

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Ellen Foster

Introduction

Ellen Foster is a coming-of-age story told from the perspective of the eleven-year-old narrator Ellen. Kaye Gibbons creates a story that reflects some of her own childhood experiences in a way that is not melodramatic, but in fact inspirational in the way Ellen can create happiness from a life that is filled with woe. This novel does more than tell about a girl's will to survive; it also focuses attention on the role of race in the Southern community. Ellen describes how her understanding of her friendship with Starletta, an African-American girl, grows as Ellen begins to understand the dynamics of love, friendship, and family.

While this novel does not have any specific details about sexual abuse from Ellen's father, the teacher should be prepared for the inferences of abuse. Also, because this novel's setting is Southern America, the reader should be prepared for frank language concerning African-Americans.

Gibbons has gone on to write *The Life All Around Me*, which chronicles Ellen's life at the age of fifteen.

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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.

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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.

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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?

6. The end of the chapter describes Ellen's experience with the end of the funeral and the closing of the casket. What does Ellen ask? How does she answer her own question?

7. Of all the people Ellen describes at the funeral, to whom does she feel the closest?

8. Cite the personification that is used to describe Ellen's grandmother's anger toward her son-in-law.

9. At the end of the fourth chapter, Ellen relates the following: "I do not have to worry about snakes anymore here. The pony scares them off and I am up high anyway so they cannot bite me." How might this comment be symbolic?

Chapter Ten

Vocabulary

accumulating – amassing
ailed – to have caused pain or discomfort
appreciated – became greater in worth
audacity – boldness
chiseled – crafted
commentary – an explanation
infernal – diabolical
intentions – resolutions; what someone plans to do
peculiar – different; odd
rampage – crazy and boisterous action
sympathized – to have shared sadness with someone

1. Ellen states that she does not care about possessions. She explains that she cares only about money. What might be another reason why she leaves her possessions with Julia and Roy when her grandmother comes to take her to her home?

2. Describe the drive home from Julia and Roy's house to Ellen's grandmother.

3. How does Ellen misinterpret her grandmother's coldness toward her?

4. What does Ellen's grandmother force her to do?
