

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

A Day No Pigs Would Die

by

Robert Newton Peck

Book Information

Robert Newton Peck, A Day No Pigs Would Die
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150 Pages
Book Level: 4.4
Interest Level: UG

To a thirteen-year-old Vermont farm boy whose father slaughters pigs for a living, maturity comes early as he learns "doing what's got to be done," especially regarding his pet pig who cannot produce a litter.

Topics: Emotions, Love; Family Life, Fathers; Family Life, Growing Up; Family Life, Sons; Places, Farms; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+

Main Characters

Aunt Carrie Robert's aunt

Aunt Matty a friend of Mama's who attempts to teach Robert grammar

Ben Tanner a neighbor who gives Robert his pig, Pinky, and takes Robert to the Rutland fair

Bess Tanner Ben Tanner's wife

Ira Long Widow Bascom's hired hand, who owns Hussy

Mama Robert's mother

Mr. Hillman a neighbor who digs up his child's grave

Mrs. Hillman Mr. Hillman's wife

Papa Robert's father

Robert the twelve-year-old Shaker boy who narrates the story

Widow Bascom a neighbor who suggests the Tanners take Robert to the fair

Vocabulary

barren unable to bear young

goiter a swelling in the front of the neck caused by an enlargement of the thyroid gland

Plain People people who follow the Shaker religion

Synopsis

Robert lives on a farm in Vermont. His family members are Shakers, "Plain People," who are poor, proud, hard-working and don't abide "frills." Papa can't read or write, but he considers himself to have a good life.

The story opens with Robert helping his neighbor's cow through a difficult birth, and being injured in the process. In thanks, the neighbor gives Robert a pig, which Robert names Pinky. Pinky is the first thing Robert has ever owned.

In school, Robert receives all A's except for a D in English. Aunt Matty attempts to tutor him in grammar, but concludes he is hopeless.

One night, Papa takes Robert with him to the cemetery. They find their neighbor digging up the grave of the illegitimate daughter he was never before willing to claim as his own. The neighbor takes the daughter home to be buried.

Another neighbor, the Widow Bascom, is the talk of some of the neighbors for her relationship with her hired man. Robert visits her and decides she is "some improved" over the woman who previously hit him with a broom handle for walking through her strawberries. She suggests that the Tanners take Robert with them to the fair in Rutland.

Robert has a wonderful time at the fair. He leads the much-admired twin bull calves around the ring, and Pinky receives a blue ribbon. Even vomiting during the judging can't destroy Robert's happiness.

Both Robert and Papa realize that men can be foolish when they participate in caging a neighbor's pet dog with a weasel. The dog kills the weasel, but the badly injured dog must be shot.

Pinky turns out to be barren. Papa forces Robert to help him slaughter her for food. Although he is heartbroken, Robert forgives Papa.

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Papa tells Robert he will soon die, and Robert will need to take on the responsibilities of the man of the farm. When Papa dies, that is what Robert does.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

What were some of the ways that Robert showed he had become a man by the end of the story?

When Papa died, Robert did the chores, and then took charge of the burial. He touched Papa's tools to see if his hands were "sized enough to take hold." He organized the burial, gave the speech, dug the grave, "sent" Mama and Carrie to bed afterwards. He began to be on a first-name basis with Ben and Bess Tanner, and told them he "aims to" sound like Papa. He took care of the animals and began making Solomon a bow for his yoke after the funeral.

Literary Analysis

The Pecks belonged to the Shaker religion. List some of ways their religion affected their lives.

There were no "frills," especially on Sunday; for example, Robert could not go to a baseball game on Sunday. They had a simple life. Mama made most of their clothing. They worked hard; a man's work was his "mission." They followed Shaker Law about farming; for example, pigs were not housed near the oxen. They attended the Shaker Meeting.

Inferential Comprehension

In what ways were Robert and Papa alike? In what ways were they different?

Robert and Papa were more alike than different. They had the same reaction to the dog/weasel fight (p. 103), and the same reaction to killing Pinky (p. 129). Of course, Papa was more mature than Robert and had much to teach him. For example, Papa made the decision to slaughter Pinky because he felt it "had to be done." The fact that Robert kissed Papa's hand afterward showed he understood Papa. It seemed likely that Robert would be very much like his father. One difference is that he will not be illiterate.

Constructing Meaning

Before speaking at his father's burial, Robert thought: "Being his son was like knowing a king." Why did he think this?

Papa did not have worldly wealth, but he had dignity, principles and the respect of his friends and neighbors. Papa was honest, worked very hard, was grateful for what he had, was content with his lot in life and loved his son.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features The theme of *A Day No Pigs Would Die* is that a person becomes an adult when he or she does what needs to be done in life regardless of how he or she may feel about it. In the story, that meant killing Pinky when she was barren and too expensive to feed, and for Robert, it meant handling Papa's funeral and taking over his responsibilities. Ask the students what signifies becoming an adult in their culture and at what age it usually occurs. Ask them to write an essay, create a collage, draw a picture, or use another medium of their choice to convey their thoughts.

Understanding Characterization Robert lived a very simple life. One of the many ways the reader learns this is that Robert did not know what a "rest room" was when he attended the fair. Ask the students to brainstorm about all the

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contemporary items Robert would find confusing if he were to go through a typical day with them. Make a list as a class.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Robert's family belonged to the Shaker religion. The story described the religion's prohibition of "frills," and its emphasis on hard work and character. Instruct the students to research the history, beliefs, and practices of the Shaker religion. They could compare the Shaker religion with other religious practices and beliefs. Have them write a report about what they learn.

Recognizing Feelings Papa could not read or write. As a result, he could not vote. Papa told Robert he was satisfied with his life, yet he encouraged Robert to study, and when Papa died, Robert found a scrap of paper on which Papa had tried to write his name. Walk the students through their typical day of school, play, and extracurricular activities, and have them identify what the impact of being illiterate would be on their activities and how they would feel. Have them reflect on the futures they would face if they were illiterate. Finally, relay to the class statistics about literacy around the world and in your state and community.