

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Miss Hickory

by

Carolyn Sherwin Bailey

Book Information

Carolyn Sherwin Bailey, Miss Hickory
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When a country doll is left outside for the winter, she must depend on her own resources to survive.

Award: Newbery Medal

Topics: Family Life, Toys; Places,
Countryside/Rural

Main Characters

Ann the young girl who plays with Miss Hickory when she comes to Great-granny Brown's house; she is sent to school in Boston

Bull Frog the venerable old frog who becomes tired of having rocks thrown at him; he moves to Third Brook and finds himself stuck in the ice

Cock-Pheasant the domineering mate of Hen-Pheasant, who refuses to let her eat with him when fall comes

Cow the mother of Wild-Heifer and Barn-Heifer, who provides Mr. T. Willard-Brown with much amusement when she overeats and has to be medicated by the farmer

Crow the kind old crow who helps Miss Hickory find a home

Doe the protective mother of Fawn; she disappears one day during hunting season

Fawn the adventurous son of Doe, who goes into the orchard after his mother warns him not to; he is befriended by Wild-Heifer after his mother disappears

Great-granny Brown the elderly woman who usually takes care of her great-granddaughter, Ann; she goes to Boston for the winter

Ground Hog the fearful old groundhog who hides from his own shadow; spring cannot come until he does not see his shadow

Hen-Pheasant the timid and drab mate of Cock-Pheasant, who follows Miss Hickory's advice and forms a Ladies' Aid Society of other hen-pheasants in order to survive the winter without the help of all the cock-pheasants

Mr. T. Willard-Brown the barn cat who teaches Miss Hickory about the farm

Robin Redbreast the bird who built the nest in which Miss Hickory winters; Robin indignantly reclaims it in the spring

Squirrel the forgetful squirrel who is constantly rebuffed when he attempts to build a friendship with Miss Hickory; in the spring he is starving and finally gives in to his inclination to eat her hickory-nut head

Timothy the boy from the farm next door, who helps Ann find Miss Hickory

Wild-Heifer the daughter of Cow who prefers to spend her time wandering in the woods; she becomes friends with Fawn after Doe disappears

Vocabulary

busybody someone who is aggressively curious about other people's business

clodhoppers large clumsy shoes

covetous consumed with a desire to have something that belongs to someone else

crotchety extremely grumpy

hardheaded lacking the willingness to accept new ideas; stubborn

retort a clever or sharp answer

wastrel one who is wasteful; an idler

Synopsis

Miss Hickory is a fussy doll with an apple tree twig for a body and a hickory nut head. She has lived most of her life in a corncob house. One autumn she finds out from Crow that the young girl who takes care of her has left for school for the winter without bringing her inside. While she investigates this, Mr. T. Willard-Brown, the barn cat, informs her that Chipmunk has stolen her house. Distraught, Miss Hickory sits against the rose trellis for several days. Crow finally persuades her to spend the winter in a

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vacant robin's nest high in an apple tree.

While she is adjusting to her new home, Miss Hickory begins spending a lot of time in the woods. There she meets the forgetful Squirrel, who can never find his buried nuts. Because she realizes Squirrel may want her nut head, she is upset to discover that Squirrel lives in a hole at the base of her apple tree.

One day while Miss Hickory is walking with her friend Hen-Pheasant, she learns that Cock-Pheasant refuses to allow Hen-Pheasant to eat with him. Miss Hickory encourages Hen-Pheasant to move to a better home and form a Ladies' Aid Society to protect herself against Cock-Pheasant's abuse.

Later, Miss Hickory is woken up by Mr. T. Willard-Brown, who has come to tell her that Cow has a stomachache and is about to be given medicine by the farmer. Miss Hickory offends the cat by scolding him for waking her up, but she later regrets not going to the barn with him.

Throughout the season Miss Hickory is plagued by Squirrel, who comes up to her nest to chat. Miss Hickory still fears he is after her head and repeatedly rebuffs Squirrel's attempts at friendship.

On Christmas Eve, Squirrel comes to tell her that all the animals go into the barn to see the mystical image of a baby in the manger. At first, Miss Hickory refuses to believe him. When she changes her mind and hurries down to the barn, however, it is too crowded for her to see the miracle.

By February, Miss Hickory is tired of winter weather. She finds out that Ground Hog has the power to bring spring. Inspired, she forces the hen-pheasants to lure Ground Hog out of his hole with some corn. Her plan brings an early spring.

In spring Miss Hickory watches for the return of Crow. When he finally visits, she recognizes him as the crow that has recently been terrorizing the neighborhood. She forgives him when he offers to

take her up in the air.

As the weather warms, Miss Hickory spends more time away from her nest. One day she returns to find Robin has come back and is raising a family there. After a brief argument, Miss Hickory relinquishes the nest and climbs down the tree.

She then decides to go to Squirrel's hole because she thinks he is gone. She is very surprised to find Squirrel inside his hole starving to death. Disgusted, Miss Hickory begins to scold Squirrel about all the nuts he has either misplaced or not stored. Squirrel is enraged and plucks off her head and eats it.

While Miss Hickory's head is being eaten, the head considers how foolish Miss Hickory has been to waste so many opportunities for kindness and friendship with the local animals. Her body, however, is not dead. It feels its way out of the hole and climbs up the tree. There it grafts onto the old apple tree. Later, Crow leads the girl who played with Miss Hickory up the tree to see Miss Hickory's body thriving as a scion, or new graft to rejuvenate an old tree.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

What does Crow mean when he says to Miss Hickory, "Keep your sap running"?

When Crow finds Miss Hickory leaning against the wall, he knows it is not good. He wants her to stay active so that her sap keeps running, partly because sitting around upset is not good for her mental health, and partly because he knows that as a twig/scion she needs to keep her sap running to stay vital. His recommendation to keep her sap running is a suggestion that she take proper care of herself and stay alive.

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Literary Analysis

Who is Miss Hickory's main enemy in this story?

While Squirrel does pose a threat to Miss Hickory throughout the story and eventually ends up eating her head after being antagonized by Miss Hickory, Miss Hickory's main enemy seems to be herself. Her neighbors repeatedly offer her kindness and chances for adventure, but she is never able to accept that others may like her and wish to befriend her. Instead she attributes an ulterior motive to everyone's actions and insults those who want to be her friends. Not only does she offend others, but she also harms herself by acting in this fashion. By the end of the story Squirrel is completely frustrated with her, and Mr. T. Willard-Brown seems to have given up on trying to be her friend.

Inferential Comprehension

Why do Crow, Squirrel, and Hen-Pheasant continue to be friendly with Miss Hickory even though she frequently insults them?

At first, Crow likes Miss Hickory because she gives him corn. He also seems to feel sorry for Miss Hickory and attributes much of her behavior to her hard nut head. He respects Miss Hickory's ladylike tendencies and affiliation with the humans. Squirrel's feelings seem to be conflicted; he seems to be lonely and longing for companionship since his mother died, and he also tries to be a good neighbor to Miss Hickory. Squirrel wants to give Miss Hickory the benefit of the doubt because of her hard head, but it is obvious that he is also interested in her as a food source. Hen-Pheasant does not have the courage or the intelligence to question Miss Hickory's manners. She is used to being mistreated, and she is also somewhat indebted to Miss Hickory for finding her a home, teaching her to sew, and providing companions for her during the long winter.

Constructing Meaning

How did you feel when Squirrel ate Miss Hickory's head?

Students' responses will vary, probably ranging from a sense of horror that Miss Hickory's head is eaten, to a sense of amusement that Miss Hickory continues to talk even as she is eaten, to a sense of justice that Miss Hickory is punished for her sharp tongue and bad temper.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization Miss Hickory is a unique doll formed from a twig and a hickory nut, which makes her hardheaded and close-minded. Have the students use natural objects to create their own Miss Hickory. Have them describe for the class how they think the objects they used might determine the personality of their doll.

Comparing and Contrasting Miss Hickory's definition of being well-dressed changes throughout the course of this book. Have the students draw their own version of what Miss Hickory might have looked like at the beginning, middle, and end of this book.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The animals in Miss Hickory's world have very different ways of doing things than what Miss Hickory thinks is proper. For instance, Bull Frog thinks it is perfectly normal to eat one's winter skin, but Miss Hickory is obviously shocked when he does so. For her it is more customary to simply discard the winter clothes and make new garments. Have the students find at least five cultural clashes between Miss Hickory and the animals. Have the students identify what Miss Hickory believes the standard rule should be and what the animal feels is the proper way to do things.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning When spring comes to the apple orchard, much figurative language is used to describe its beauty. Have the students research the mythological figures of Daphne and Persephone and write a short paper

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on the reason they are used to describe the
orchard.