

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Of Nightingales That Weep by Katherine Paterson

Book Information

Katherine Paterson, Of Nightingales That Weep

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Interest Level: UG

The vain young daughter of a samurai finds her comfortable life ripped apart when opposing warrior clans begin a struggle for imperial control of Japan.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Misc./Other;
Phoenix Award/Honor

Topics: Countries/Regions, Japan; Emotions, Love;
Wars, Misc./Other

Main Characters

Antoku a five-year-old boy who is made Emperor

Chieko Takiko's mother, who marries Goro after Lord Moriyuki dies

Choko the woman who is Takiko's maid while Takiko is living in her aunt's house

Empress Kenreimon'in the mother of Antoku and wife of the retired Emperor; she is forced into a nunnery after being taken prisoner by the Genji clan

Fusa the peasant woman who is a devoted servant at Goro's estate; Takiko bonds with her

Goro a short, grotesque-looking potter who loves generously and grieves deeply

Hideo a daring Genji samurai and spy who wins Takiko's heart and aids in her escape

Ichiro Takiko's half brother, son of Chieko and Goro

Kamaji a merchant who is instrumental in finding Takiko a place at court

Lady Kiyomori Emperor Antoku's grandmother, a courageous and intelligent woman

Lady Uchinaka Chieko's aunt, who reluctantly takes in Chieko and Takiko to live when they have no money; she teaches Takiko to play the koto

Lord Moriyuki Takiko's biological father, a samurai of the Heike clan who dies a hero in a clan war

Mieko Takiko's maid, who travels everywhere with her and becomes her friend

Munemori the military ruler of the Heike clan and a bumbling leader

Princess Aoi the woman whom Takiko serves as hairdresser when she comes to court; the wife of Prince Kira, and Hideo's lover

Takiko the main character of the story, a beautiful young adolescent girl who is torn by her love of an enemy warrior and loyalty to her people

Vocabulary

brazier a metal pan holding charcoal or burning coals used for heating or cooking

consort the husband or wife of a monarch

dilettante amateur

koto a Japanese instrument having seven to thirteen strings strung over an oblong box

samurai a professional warrior who was a member of the nobility in feudal Japan

scruples qualms; the feelings of uneasiness that arise as the result of conscience and thereby hinder action

Synopsis

The Genji and Heike clans are at war in twelfth-century feudal Japan. Eleven-year-old Takiko, the daughter of a Heike samurai, romanticizes the war and dreams of her father's valor. With the news of her father's death, Takiko's life quickly changes. Takiko and her mother, Chieko, have been living off the charity of Chieko's aunt. A new marriage is arranged for Chieko, and she goes to the country to marry an ugly potter named Goro. Takiko joins them in a few weeks and is repulsed by Goro's looks. She refuses to be near him and, thus, alienates herself from her mother, too. Instead, Takiko befriends Goro's servant, Fusa. At the New Year celebration later that year, Takiko asks forgiveness of Goro for her childish ways. Takiko entertains the gathered guests by playing the koto and singing beautifully. At the end of the evening Takiko is shocked to learn that her mother is pregnant.

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With the birth of her brother, Ichiro, come feelings of jealousy for Takiko. She begins spending time with Goro and learns the pottery trade as well as Japanese and Chinese script while her mother's attentions are on the baby. Roles are soon reversed, however, with Ichiro becoming Goro's companion while Takiko learns household duties. When a merchant comes to take Goro's wares to the city, he notes Takiko's beauty and musical ability and promises to find a place for her at court in the city. He finds her a position with Princess Aoi as an attendant.

Although cold and formal in demeanor, the Princess appreciates Takiko's ability as a hairdresser and musician. She asks Takiko to perform for her husband, Prince Kira, who is at the palace with his new wife. The Princess also trusts Takiko to receive a message from Hideo, a Genji samurai, who is Aoi's lover. Hideo delivers a message to Takiko but not before indicating his interest in her. Takiko's heart burns with desire, but she is torn by the idea of loving her mistress's lover as well as an enemy spy. She is happy to get away from the situation when she is asked to live in the court of the boy Emperor, Antoku, so that she can entertain him with her music.

The battle between the Genji and Heike nears the city. In order to protect the young Emperor, the military head of the Heike clan, Munemori, moves his family and members of court into exile on Yashima, an island close to the Japanese mainland. Takiko accompanies them, professing her allegiance as a Heike. Lady Kiyomori, Antoku's grandmother, takes the Imperial Regalia with her in order to keep anyone else from being crowned Emperor. Things seem safe on the island for a while, and Takiko enjoys the fresh air but begins to feel homesick for her family, even Goro. Munemori makes an attempt to establish the Heike on the mainland again, but he is forced to retreat back to the island.

One night, Munemori indicates a romantic interest in Takiko. She is repulsed by him. She tells her servant, Mieko, that she will sleep in the garden that evening to avoid his advances. While reclining by a

rock, she sees Hideo, who is spying on the royal compound. Although she feels traitorous, she gives him time to escape. Takiko is confused by her feelings for Hideo and walks around in a daze. The people of the court think she is insane, and Munemori loses interest in her. Overwhelmed by her strong feelings of love for Hideo, Takiko decides to pray at the monks' temple on the hill. She finds Hideo there, and he takes her to his hiding place, where they make love. Their next rendezvous is foiled when Goro arrives at the island pleading for Takiko to return with him to help her mother through another childbirth. Takiko refuses, and Goro returns home alone. Chieko is heartbroken, and Fusa is asked instead to help Chieko when her labor nears. Fusa becomes ill shortly after arriving, and she, Chieko, Ichiro, and the infant all perish from the plague.

The Heike and Genji clans finally engage in a major naval battle. Although the Heike are known for their sea knowledge, the Genji quickly defeat them. Not wanting to be taken captive, Lady Kiyomori, holding her grandson, Emperor Antoku, jumps overboard. Many other members of the court and imperial family follow. Takiko is taken captive aboard a Genji ship, where Hideo tells her he will help her escape. When they reach shore, Hideo gives her a package of peasant clothing and tells her to go home to her family until he can come for her.

After struggling to get home, Takiko is dismayed to find total desolation, her mother dead, and Goro embittered. Takiko works side by side with the angry Goro waiting for Hideo's return. After a misunderstanding, Goro accidentally burns her face with a hot poker. Once she recovers, her relationship with Goro improves, and he takes comfort in her koto playing. When Hideo finally returns, he is repulsed by Takiko's appearance and leaves with an empty promise of returning someday. Takiko realizes the folly of her ways and wishes to return to the city and enter the nunnery, which is the fate of all the other Heike women captives. Goro accompanies her to the nunnery gates. When she enters the temple, she speaks to Empress Kenreimon'in, the Emperor's mother, asking for

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admittance. Presenting gifts to the temple, the Empress is impressed by the odd-shaped piece of pottery Goro has given as a New Year's token. She finds it beautiful. Noting that Takiko was never good with prayer, she tells her she could help heal her people with her music and plants the seed of the idea of Goro's goodness. Running out of the temple, Takiko catches up to Goro, who is returning home, thinking how she will tell him she wants to be his wife. He welcomes her into his life, and she cries out in joy at the birth of their first child, a daughter.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why is Takiko given the advice not to love a man?

Both Lady Uchinaka and Princess Aoi give Takiko this advice. Lady Uchinaka witnessed her niece, Chieko, grieving over the loss of her husband. Chieko also grieved while he lived, constantly worrying about his well-being when he went off to his various battles. Princess Aoi's relationship with her husband seems rather detached and formal. She does not seem upset that he has taken a new wife. She has, however, allowed herself to fall in love with Hideo, and he breaks her heart.

Literary Analysis

Of Nightingales That Weep is a "coming of age" story. How does Katherine Paterson effectively use the setting of the story to bring out the feelings of the transition from childhood to adulthood?

Adolescents often feel they are confronted with many barriers as they make the transition to adulthood. The barriers may be physical or mental. Takiko faces the barriers of class differences as well as customs and clearly defined roles for males and females. She finds herself feeling captive, either by the house or the island. Feeling trapped is a universal feeling for youth, and Paterson captures it by describing the guarded feeling under which Takiko lives. Takiko also dreams of Hideo, not unlike other teenagers and their first "puppy love." She is excited about new changes in her life, but the anticipation often far exceeds the reality of life.

Inferential Comprehension

How does Takiko's feelings toward Goro change during the course of the story?

Takiko is initially fearful of Goro, being repulsed by his looks. By the New Year, she realizes her childishness and asks forgiveness. He generously says there is nothing to forgive. After this, Takiko follows him and learns pottery and script from him. She seems disappointed as the roles are reversed, and she must do womanly tasks while Ichiro follows his father. When she goes to court and then into exile, she realizes she misses the country, her family, and even Goro. She has come to love him as a father. She refuses to return home with him, however, when her mother is pregnant, being enticed by the promise of a relationship with Hideo. When she finally does return, she finds a broken and bitter man, for Goro lost everything dear to him because of the Genji rebellion and the plague. Their relationship slowly rebuilds over time by working side by side, and Takiko begins to give comfort to him again with her koto. In the end, with her physical beauty gone and with the Empress's help, she realizes the meaning of love and marries Goro.

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Constructing Meaning

In what way is Hideo superficial?

Hideo is attracted to beautiful women, but he does not stay in one relationship very long. He was Princess Aoi's lover but moved on to Takiko, attracted by her youthful beauty and musical ability. When he returns to get her at Goro's estate, he does not recognize her because he is looking for the same woman he left the year before. Takiko had been scarred in an accident and is also browned and chapped from the hard work in the fields. He cannot see her beauty through this new appearance of hers, and he childishly runs away, much as Takiko had run from Goro when she first met him.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Plot Takiko's life during the story takes many twists and turns. She considers her father's death at the beginning of the story to be "the most important event in her short life." Have the students make a simple line graph of the plot, indicating the many turning points in Takiko's life since that moment. Label the rising action, climax, falling action, and the resolution.

Recognizing Setting The story *Of Nightingales That Weep* follows the travels of Takiko as she moves from one home to another on land, as well as by sea. Students may enjoy familiarizing themselves with Japan and its geography. Obtain a map of Japan and have the students locate and trace Takiko's travels during the book. Labels can be used to indicate the places on the map where she lived, as well as places of battle.

Comparing and Contrasting Many customs of Japanese feudal life are shown in the story, such as a woman lowering her eyes when in a man's presence, having a companion when traveling, negotiating marriages, and kowtowing. Have the students go through the book and compile a list of the customs of the time. Then have them research Japanese customs today and note the changes that have occurred over the centuries.

Identifying Persuasive Language Takiko has a talent for musical expression. She takes lessons

but goes beyond the usual repertoire in the pieces she selects to play. In all she chooses to do, Takiko puts her heart in it. Her gift is recognized, and she is asked to perform for the Emperor. She wins the heart of the court. Before the dawn of electricity and the advances in technology that have brought us recorded music and television, all entertainment was live. Entertainers wooed their audience, hoping to be asked to return. Put on a class talent show to showcase the many talents of the students. Some suggestions for entertainment are performing music or a dance, a comedy act, or reciting a poem or a Japanese folk tale with some actions. Encourage the students to "give it their all" to persuade the audience to ask for an encore.