

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Zeely

by

Virginia Hamilton

Book Information

Virginia Hamilton, Zeely
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Geeder's summer at her uncle's farm is made special because of her friendship with a very tall, composed woman who raises hogs and who closely resembles the magazine photograph of a Watutsi queen.

Topics: Animals, Pigs; People, African American; Places, Farms; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8

Main Characters

Bennie Green Toeboy's playmate who hosts a bonfire

Ecko, Coy, and the man the three couriers in the tale Zeely tells Geeder

Elizabeth Perry (Geeder) a young girl who tries to reinvent herself while she is on vacation at her uncle's farm; she renames herself and makes up stories

John Perry (Toeboy) Geeder's younger brother, who likes to socialize but is easily intimidated by Geeder

Miss Zeely Tayber Nat Tayber's quiet daughter, who helps her father raise hogs; Geeder believes Zeely is a queen

Mr. and Mrs. Perry Geeder and Toeboy's parents, who send the children to visit Uncle Ross

Mr. Nat Tayber Zeely's ill-tempered and proud father, who raises hogs for a living

the tiny old woman an old, eccentric woman who lived by a lake that Zeely swam in as a child; the old woman believes that she transformed Zeely into "the night"

Uncle Ross Geeder and Toeboy's uncle who lives on a farm; he tolerates Geeder's imaginative games

Warner a boy at the bonfire who contradicts Geeder's romantic view of Zeely

Zeely's mother Zeely's parent, who died when Zeely was a young girl; she tried to keep Zeely from living in an imaginary world

Vocabulary

cackle to laugh sharply, in a way that resembles a chicken's cry

cautioned warned

couriers people who deliver messages

monotonous boring from lack of change

serene calm, peaceful

smock a loose piece of clothing, often worn to protect other clothing while working

Synopsis

Elizabeth Perry and her younger brother John are excited to be traveling alone to Uncle Ross's farm. On the train the imaginative Elizabeth renames John "Toeboy" and herself "Geeder" for the summer. When they arrive, Uncle Ross quickly accepts the new names. After touring the farmhouse, the children look at Mr. Tayber's prize hogs that are occupying the field Uncle Ross is renting to Mr. Tayber. That night the children sleep outside on the lawn. Toeboy wants to sleep near her, but Geeder makes Toeboy sleep in his own spot by telling him that strange night travellers walk along the road near her sleeping spot. Later Geeder is frightened when she observes a white figure seeming to float down the road through the darkness. The next morning Geeder wakes up Toeboy when she sees Nat Tayber and his daughter Zeely coming to feed their hogs. Zeely is an unusually tall woman who immediately appeals to Geeder's imagination. Geeder finds out from Uncle Ross that, although the Taybers have lived in town for a year and a half, they like to be left alone, so very little is known about them. That night Geeder begins to envision a friendship between her and the mysterious Zeely.

As the weeks pass Geeder keeps to herself although Toeboy plays with the village children. Geeder lives in a world of her own imagination

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where she and Zeely spend time together. One day Uncle Ross says that the Taybers will be taking forty hogs to be weighed and sold the next day. Geeder is anxious to see Zeely herding the hogs. The following morning Geeder is hurrying through her chores when she and Toeboy hear a hog squeal. They rush to the hog field to see Nat and Uncle Ross standing over an injured sow. Zeely stands at a distance shucking corn while Uncle Ross and Nat carry the sow to the barn. Zeely glances only once toward the barn. Geeder tries to speak to her, but Zeely leaves soon after the sow screams from the barn. The children go to the barn, where Uncle Ross answers Geeder's unspoken question about the sow by directing the children inside the barn. There the children are horrified and repulsed to find the bloody carcass of the newly butchered sow hanging from a crossbeam. Because the children are upset, Uncle Ross sends them to bundle magazines and catalogs in the shed. He tells them that the hog drive has been postponed until the next day.

When Geeder leafs through a magazine she finds a picture of a royal Watutsi woman who resembles Zeely. She decides that Zeely is a queen. Geeder shows Uncle Ross the picture, but he doubts Zeely is a queen. Geeder stubbornly clings to her conclusion about Zeely. That evening both children attend a bonfire and Geeder tells the other children that Zeely is a Watutsi queen. Warner, a boy at the party, interrupts to say that the Watutsi are bad people who kept slaves. Geeder counters that this has nothing to do with Zeely, and she continues to insist that Zeely is a queen. Soon Geeder leaves, and Toeboy follows her. That night the children sleep outside again and Toeboy sees Geeder's night traveller. He recognizes the traveller as Zeely coming from feeding the hogs.

Early the next morning, Geeder realizes that the hog drive has begun. Nat and a group of boys herd the hogs with poles, while Zeely is at the rear of the drive. Uncle Ross chastises Nat for hitting the hogs, but Nat ignores him. As the children run to see the drive, Toeboy tells Geeder about seeing Zeely the previous night. Geeder argues that he actually saw a night traveller. As the children watch the hog drive,

Toeboy wants to return home because he is upset by the way the hogs are treated. Geeder forces him to stay and says that Zeely will not allow real harm to come to the hogs. When Geeder sees a sow fall in the street, she races through the frenzied herd to tell Zeely. Zeely rushes to the hog and stops Nat from striking it with a pole. Together Zeely and Geeder coax the sow to her feet.

Three days later Geeder watches from the field as an unfamiliar car pulls up to the house. After the car leaves, Geeder spends much of the day in her room while Toeboy tells Uncle Ross about the night travellers. Toeboy's words remind Uncle Ross of the songs slaves used to guide themselves as they traveled at night toward freedom in Canada. When Geeder comes downstairs, Uncle Ross tells her that Zeely stopped by to speak to her and asked that Geeder meet her in the catalpa forest the next day.

The following day Geeder goes to the catalpa forest and finds Zeely, who is dressed in the garment and headband of a Watutsi woman. Zeely thanks her for helping with the hogs. When Geeder shows her the magazine picture, Zeely giggles and tells Geeder that she also loved to make up stories when she was Geeder's age. Zeely says that when she was a girl, she was so fascinated with her African heritage that her mother made her the robe she is wearing.

Zeely repeats a Watutsi tale that her mother told her. The story begins with three couriers who are sent to deliver a message to a young woman. The travels of the three couriers take them out of their homelands into vastly different climates. The first two couriers perish because they are unable to adapt to the conditions they encounter. The third courier is able to survive as he makes a weapon so that he can procure food, warm clothing, and a ship to travel across the vast body of water from Labrador. The tall, slim, and dark-skinned courier reaches land and discovers many people. He finally delivers his message to the young woman. The message says that the courier and the woman shall marry, have children, and travel until they find other people like themselves. Zeely is disappointed when Geeder does not understand the significance of her

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story.

Zeely then tells Geeder another story of an old woman who lived near her in Canada. Most children were afraid of the strangely dressed woman, but Zeely would often exchange words with the woman. One night shortly after Zeely finished swimming alone in a dark lake, Zeely saw the old woman approach. Frightened at seeing the mysterious woman walking around at night, Zeely hid. From her hiding place, Zeely saw the woman point her cane at a stick and watched the stick transform into a snake. In a similar fashion, the old woman transformed a stone into a turtle. When the woman noticed Zeely, she pointed her cane at Zeely, grabbed her, and laughingly said that Zeely was now "the night." Zeely was stunned by the pronouncement but, since she loved to walk and swim in the night, she was delighted that she had become "the night."

When Zeely later related her experience to her mother, her mother explained that the old woman was "not quite right in her head." Zeely's mother explained that darkness had made Zeely mistake a snake and a turtle for a stick and a stone. Zeely's mother also said that the old woman called Zeely "the night" because her skin was so dark. At the time, Zeely was disappointed in her mother's explanation although she recognized that it was true.

Zeely tells Geeder that no robe can make her more than she is and no one can make her "the night." When Geeder argues that Zeely is special because she is so different, Zeely responds that Geeder would not like to be so different from others. She encourages Geeder to be Elizabeth, who she really is, rather than her imaginary self, Geeder, who invents stories.

When Geeder returns, she refuses to talk of her visit with Zeely and goes to her room. At dinner, Geeder wears a nice dress and hair ribbon to the table; Toeboy says Geeder looks like she does when she goes to school, not like Geeder. Uncle Ross addresses Geeder as Elizabeth, and Toeboy realizes that Geeder has really changed. When

Geeder tells Uncle Ross and Toeboy about her encounter with Zeely, Toeboy seems disappointed that Zeely is not a queen. Geeder argues that Zeely truly is a queen for, although Zeely herds hogs, she is not defined by what she does. Rather, she is defined by what is inside of her, the part of her that dares to swim alone in a dark lake or walk alone down a dark road night after night.

That night, Geeder reminds herself to "remember the turtle ... remember the snake." She realizes that, with all of her talking at the dinner table, she did not even taste her meal.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why is Geeder frightened the first time she sees Zeely walking down the road in the dark?

Since Zeely's dark skin blends with the night, only her loose white smock can be clearly seen, so she seems to float. She also moves very quietly. Since Geeder has just invented a story about sinister night travellers, she actually begins to believe her own story and fears that she is actually seeing a night traveller. Geeder obviously has an active imagination and frequently convinces herself that her stories are true, so it is often difficult for her to recognize reality.

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Literary Analysis

Why is it so easy for Geeder to lose herself in an imaginary world on Uncle Ross's farm?

Since few people in Uncle Ross's community know Geeder, she does not have to worry about people questioning her change in behavior. This is especially true because both Uncle Ross and Toeboy play along with most of Geeder's games. Secondly, Geeder does not have to attend school and the farm is rather isolated, so she can choose when she socializes with others. Furthermore, she often chooses not to socialize because other children interfere with her imaginary world. Also, the farmhouse is an old place with many interesting strange rooms that lend themselves to being part of an imaginary world. Finally, Zeely is a woman who is unique in appearance and rarely speaks, which allows Geeder to freely create a romantic story about her.

Inferential Comprehension

At the end of the story Geeder looks at the stars and thinks of naming the blue star after Miss Zeely. Why does Geeder think that Zeely resembles the star?

Geeder has many reasons for naming the star after Zeely. She recognizes that, while Zeely may not always live near Uncle Ross, Geeder can always feel Zeely's presence when she looks at the star. Also, since she most likely associates evenings with Zeely, it is appropriate that she associates Zeely with something that reminds her of the night. In addition, Zeely's presence is calm and serene, probably two emotions that Geeder feels when she looks at the night sky.

Constructing Meaning

Do you think it is wrong for Geeder to invent stories about a woman she does not know? Explain.

Answers will vary. Some students may feel that Geeder's rumors very easily could have caused trouble for Zeely, especially after Warner tells about the cruelty of the Watutsi royalty. However, some students may feel that there is no harm in Geeder exploring her imaginary world, particularly since the things she is saying about Zeely are meant to be complimentary. Still other students may feel that Geeder is actually doing something good by trying to make people see Zeely in a positive light. They may also argue that Zeely herself does not seem too upset about the stories and even seems somewhat flattered by Geeder's vision of her as a queen.

Teachable Skills

Responding to Literature Geeder creates her own fantasy world, in which Zeely is a queen who befriends her. The picture of the Watutsi woman inspires Geeder's ideas about Zeely. Have the students write about something they once imagined or can imagine about someone they know. Instruct the students include details in their stories that explain what inspires their imaginations.

Recognizing Details Uncle Ross chastises Nat for the methods he uses to herd the hogs. Have the students suggest better ways for Nat to move his hogs to Red Barn. Have them share their ideas in class.

Comparing and Contrasting Geeder frequently talks about how she feels when she is in dark places. Ask students to list the different occasions when Geeder is in a dark place. On their lists, students should note how Geeder feels on each occasion. In a class discussion, ask students to explain how Geeder's feelings about dark places has changed by the end of the story. Also, ask students to speculate how Zeely may have helped Geeder to feel differently about the dark.

Understanding the Author's Craft Although most

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of this story is told from Geeder's perspective, Toeboy is affected by many of Geeder's ideas and actions. Have the students imagine what Toeboy might write in a letter to his parents about the events that occur in this book.