

A Day No Pigs Would Die Study Guide

A Day No Pigs Would Die by Robert Newton Peck

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Overview

Peck combines fiction and nonfiction in *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, a semiautobiography of his childhood days in Vermont. Although Peck presents characters who live in a different era, old and young readers alike will identify with the feelings of Rob, the main character.

Without becoming sentimental, Peck packs the book with emotions, from the excitement of going to the city to the quietness of watching a sunset. At times the reader will smile; at times, laugh out loud; and at times, even cry. And after sharing so many of Rob's emotions, readers end up knowing themselves better.

About the Author

France. After returning to the U.S., he attended Rollins College in Winter Park, R obert Newton Peck was born on February 17, 1928, in a rural Shaker community in Vermont. He has been a farmer, a lumberjack, a hog butcher, and a paper mill worker. From 1945 to 1947 he served in the army and was stationed in Italy, Germany, and Florida, and received his bachelor's degree in 1953. He married Dorothy Houston, a librarian, in 1958. The Pecks have two children.

Peck's first book, *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, launched his prolific writing career.

The book is based on Peck's own boyhood in rural Vermont and his relationship with his father. In 1973, he published *Path of Hunters*, about animal life in a meadow, and *Millie's Boy*, another novel about a boy and his father. Peck says he writes for no certain age level, and most of his books cross the lines between adult, young adult, and children's literature. Many of his works are set in rural Vermont in the 1920s and 1930s or, in the case of his historical novels, in the Revolutionary War period.

In 1974 his series of ten *Soup* books was born with the publication of *Soap*.

A childhood friend of Peck's inspired these books about the misadventures of two best friends. His *Soup for President* won the 1982 Mark Twain Award.

Peck publishes an average of three books a year. Having written two books on the craft of writing for adults, he is in demand as a speaker at writing workshops and seminars, yet he also takes time to answer his fan mail. His hobbies include playing ragtime piano, writing songs, and skiing.



Plot Summary

Robert is a Shaker boy, a member of a religious sect that no longer exists today. He tells his story in his own words, sweet and straightforward, as a preteen would do, about a life in Vermont that is simple and plain. Although he is only thirteen by the time the book ends, Robert takes his place in Shaker society and indeed in the world outside, as a grown man.

Robert undergoes a "coming of age" as he unfolds the adventures and misadventures of the year or so before he becomes a man. Robert works much harder than many young people do today. His father, whom he calls Papa, teaches his son through everyday things, such as doing his chores each day. Some of these teachings are profound, such as a person being born to do a "mission;" Robert's mission at present is doing the chores. Papa's mission is slaughtering meat, in particular, pigs, and he does this unpleasant job willingly in order to support his family and serve the community. Papa's other teachings are merely folk beliefs, such as the idea that lodging a pig close to a milk cow will curdle her milk. At this point in his life, Robert doesn't question many of his father's teachings, although on occasion he balks against certain Shaker prohibitions, such as not being able to have a good time on Sundays. From the outset, the reader will notice that Robert occasionally lets slips with a swear word, which Papa frowns upon but occasionally lets pass.

Robert goes to school after he does his chores. He doesn't mind school but he doesn't like it so much, either. His parents insist that he go, especially Papa, who forthrightly owns that he cannot read and write. He wants to make sure that Robert learns, so his son can have opportunities he has missed. For example, his father cannot vote because he cannot read and write. When Robert misses school, Papa reminds him that he must attend because he must know how to read and write in order to succeed in society.

Most of this story centers around a Robert and a pig. As the book opens, Robert finds himself smack in the middle of a life-threatening adventure. He skips school one day, upset because one of the students has mocked him for his plain Shaker clothing. He happens upon a cow in labor, unable to deliver her calf. At the risk of his clothes, his comfort and at one point his life, he helps the cow give birth to twins and also relieves her of a painful goiter in her throat. After Robert is found, rescued, and properly healed, Mr. Tanner, who owns the cow and calves, rewards Robert with a piglet.

Robert calls his pig Pinky and he loves her dearly. As people often say of pigs, Pinky turns out to be a great pet, intelligent, and responsive. Robert takes her everywhere with him, including doing chores and exploring the countryside. Together the boy and pig go frog hunting to get frog legs for dinner. When the barn cat has kittens, Robert holds Pinky up so she can observe the special event. When Robert's Aunt Mattie makes a futile attempt to tutor the boy in English, she concludes with a superb dead-pan, "Next time I'll teach the pig."



Robert keeps a record of everything his pet pig eats and drinks, which is plenty. As she grows, Robert looks forward to having her bred so she can provide the family with additional income from the babies. The reader observes along with Robert as a prize boar is brought in, more than once, to mount Pinky, and although she allows him to mate with her, she does not immediately conceive. However, together with neighbors, Robert and Pinky go to the County Fair, where Pinky takes first place as the Best-Behaved Pig. Everything seems to be going well for Pinky, Robert, and his family, until his father tells him a dreadful secret: he is dying.

From that moment of revelation, Robert feels a pall hanging over him, and things start going wrong. The harvest is scarce that year, and money is, too. Pinky turns out not to be able to breed, so she becomes a liability instead of an asset in the family economy. Papa cannot seem to have much success in hunting and food is scarce. Everyone knows the inevitable; Pinky must be slaughtered and eaten. Robert assists his father with this heart-breaking chore, a certain sign that he is maturing into a young man.

Not long after, Papa passes away. By this time, Robert has already faced serious challenges suitable for a man, and now he must take the next step, becoming the man of the house. As the book ends, the reader is convinced that he will do a good job at it.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Robert tells us he should have been in school the day of his adventure with the cow. He starts the day in school but he angrily takes off when a fellow student teases him about his plain clothes during recess. Robert wears clothes that are made of plain cloth and sewn at home by his mother because of his Shaker beliefs. He leaves before the recess bell rings, heading out into the countryside.

As Robert wanders, he hears an anguished noise and turns to find his neighbor's cow out in the fields in labor but unable to deliver her calf. Although Robert does not say so, we can see that he's had some experience delivering livestock. He can see the head of the stuck calf sticking out of the rump of the cow. Robert tries to be friendly with the cow, but, as he says, "she was wild-eyed mean." Instead of standing nicely still for help, the cow, named Apron, takes off and rushes through the bushes. Robert can only catch up and help her because she has to stop for her labor pains. Lacking a rope to haul the calf out, Robert stops and removes his pants to tie around the calf's head. Just then, Apron takes off running, hauling Robert behind her with his "own bare butt and privates catching a thorn with every step." Despite the pain, Robert sticks with Apron.

The cow still cannot deliver her calf, until out of frustration, Robert beats her with a big stick. His blows finally have a good result: Apron heaves out a baby calf, along with a surge of afterbirth that seems to drown Robert. He notices then that she can hardly breathe because something seems to be stuck down her throat. Robert reaches in and removes a hard ball from inside her throat, receiving a tremendous bite and pummeling from the hooves of the cow in return. He passes out from the pain.

Chapter 1 Analysis

At the beginning at the book, Robert ironically imagines making the teasing student bleed "like a stuck pig," perhaps foreshadowing the time when his own pet pig, Pinky, must bleed and die. During his adventure helping Apron birth her calf, Robert doesn't back down, partly because of his shame at having backed down from the bully in the schoolyard. There's more going on with him, though, because from the first Robert reveals his maturity as a young man who does what needs to be done.

The reader will notice immediately that Robert uses nonstandard English, both with grammatical mistakes, such as "I should of been in school," and "wild-eyed mean," which might just be a boy's way of expressing himself, as well as words like "puckerbush" and "prickles," which are probably typical of the surrounding culture. This nonstandard use of language endears Robert and his family to us.

Robert shows us a naughty side of his personality, quite out of character with his strict Shaker upbringing, by calling Apron the cow an "old bitch." He also shows us a noble



side by staying with her right through the delivery, at considerable pain to himself. Moreover, he shows us his courage and tenacity by reaching right down into the big old cow's throat to remove a round growth, which is later revealed to be a goiter. On top of all this, the reader cannot help but laugh to imagine this boy, pant-less, being dragged across the countryside by a huge, bawling cow, who later bites and kicks him half to death.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

At the beginning of this chapter Robert comes to. He reveals that he cannot really see clearly, as if he were in a fog. He hears someone calling his papa's name, Haven Peck, and feels a rough woolen blanket wrapped around him. Someone is saying that he can hardly recognize the boy, who is covered with so much "blood and dirt and Satan." Robert is taken in hand by his mama and aunt, who wash him up with water that smells of lilac, which Robert finds calming.

It turns out that Robert has never let go of the goiter he'd wrestled from the cow's throat, even when he passed out. The reader sees the generous and funny nature of Shaker morality when Papa notes that he must cut away part of the farmer's blanket in order to hold Robert together. The farmer tells him it's not his blanket because it belongs to his horse. Robert's father removes the bandanna holding Robert's wounds so that they can bleed and "holler out all the dirt."

Lucy, which we now learn is the name of Robert's mama, must use her sewing kit to sew Robert's gaping wound up. Robert tells us that it hurts, but he never lets out a sound. As soon as he's cleaned up and put to bed, he tells his parents to inform the farmer of the baby calf out in the field, and he also apologizes for missing school. Robert's mother brings him a good supper consisting of hot succotash and milk warm from the evening's milking.

The following conversation between Robert and his papa reveals their characters. Robert doesn't make a big fuss about the good thing he did saving the cow and her calf, and Papa is somewhat cross that Robert chose to miss school. Underneath it all, the reader understands that Papa is very proud of his son's actions and feels sorry for the pain the boy feels.

Chapter 2 Analysis

When Robert is rescued, someone wraps him up in a rough woolen blanket. As one would imagine, this blanket is painfully rough against his bare skin that has been jabbed by thorns, but Robert notes that the pain seems to be keeping him awake, and alive. When the farmer says that the boy is covered with "blood and dirt and Satan," one may catch a humorous foreshadowing of the religious nature of the Shakers.

Robert's father immediately assumes that the boy has done something wrong and offers to make it right with his neighbor, an indication of the honest and accountable ways of the Shakers. When Robert's parents bring him supper, hot succotash and warm milk fresh from the cow, we are reminded again of the coarseness of Robert's surroundings, as many of us would gag at the idea of drinking milk hot from the body of the cow.



Robert's simple upbringing makes him think that this is one of the nicest treats in the world.

Small details help us understand Papa's tenderness for his son. For example, at one moment, he mildly remonstrates his son for complaining about his pain after the ordeal, reminding him that at least he didn't get whipped. The next moment, Papa is offering him a piece of spruce gum, a natural treat that Papa collected and saved to share with his son. He also collected a sumac twig, perfect for making a whistle, something a boy would treasure. Even while he comes across as being very strict and hard with Robert, the father demonstrates real affection.

In this chapter, the reader gets a first glimpse of Papa's employment, which is killing pigs. When Papa leans over to pull the quilt up over his son, Robert can smell the deathly smell of the slaughter, a smell that almost always lingers. Instead of being disgusted by the odor, Robert comments that the stench signifies his father's commitment to work hard for his family.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

After a week in bed recovering from his ordeal, Robert gets up. It is Saturday, as the boy notes, and he is happy to spend two days out of doors before having to return to school Monday morning. When Robert enters the kitchen for breakfast, Papa comments that he's glad to have some help with the farm work. The two commence work on a fence between their farm and Mr. Tanner's property. Papa uses this work time together with his son to teach the boy lessons of life. For example, the father teaches the son that fences actually bind people together by creating safe boundaries. Papa points out that in the natural world, birds and animals create virtual fences by their song or their territory marking.

While they work, Mr. Tanner approaches leading Apron, the cow, and not one but two calves. This is the moment that Robert realizes that there were twins. Tanner is pleased with the male calves, since they will grow into a pair of matched oxen to show at the county fair. He anticipates that they'll be the best in the county.

To thank Robert, Tanner brings a baby pig as a gift. Papa refuses the gift as first, citing the Shaker aversion to "frills" and noting that neighbors always help each other. Robert can hardly stand to think of the possibility of losing this piglet, so he is delighted when Tanner insists that he take it, as a late birthday present or at least as a favor to himself. This is the first personal possession that Robert has had, not only because his family avoided "frills," but also because they can afford little beyond the basics of life.

Papa cites The Book of Shaker to support the idea of building a pen for the piglet, separate from the cows. He tells Robert that the cows' milk will curdle if housed close to a pig. At first the reader may think Papa foolish, but he explains deep folk wisdom about the nature of creatures. At the end of the chapter, and of Papa's teachings, the father recalls the morning a cow wandered close to his camp and he'd milked her a bit for breakfast. When his son asks if that is stealing, Papa's reply reveals that he may not be as strict as he seems to be, saying that the "Good Lord" wouldn't want to see a man start the day with just black coffee.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Unlike the preceding two chapters, this one deals almost exclusively with beliefs and teachings as expressed by Papa to Robert. Since most readers know little about the Shaker religion, it is interesting to hear Papa explain many concepts viewed through the Shaker point of view. As the two mend fences together, reminiscent of the Robert Frost poem that teaches that good fences make good neighbors, Papa reinforces that good fences, which could also symbolize good boundaries, help people maintain proper



relationships. Animals also maintain proper boundaries, which is the natural order of things.

When Mr. Tanner appears with the offer of a piglet as a thank-you for Robert's services, the reader is horrified that the boy might not receive this gift because of Papa's beliefs in the simple ways of helping neighbors. One can perceive the subtle undercurrent of humor as Mr. Tanner maneuvers his way for giving the piglet to the boy while maintaining Papa's sense of honor. Tanner even threatens to turn the pig into bacon if she ever wanders across the fence line back into his property.

Robert justifies the gift by reasoning that Pinky is no frill, since she will become a mother and bring at least a dozen little piglets into the world each year, judging from the teats on her belly. Later in the book, the reader realizes that Pinky the pig really has become a frill because she is barren and therefore has become a consumer instead of a contributor to the family.

As Papa and Robert work, they discuss matters of cows and pigs and their proper boundaries, and the reader receives a humorous glimpse into Papa's character. He is not as strict and inflexible as he seems. Remembering a camp-out they had one summer, Robert recalls that a milk cow wandered into the campsite and that they had milked her a bit, just enough for a cup of milk for the boy and a spoon for Papa's coffee. Papa justifies this by saying God wouldn't want a man to start such a cold morning with just black coffee. The reader knows that this stretches the point of strict honesty a bit, but it adds humor and depth to Papa's character, which was already shown somewhat in the first chapter.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Robert must adapt his life to take care of his new pet pig Pinky. Before he eats, he mixes a bowl of milk and meal, which is ground-up grains, for his pet. His mother and aunt both agree that Pinky is a very pretty pig. Although they say they have never heard of a pig being named before, they approve when they recall that cows have names, too.

Robert and his father set to work creating a home for the new pig. Papa selects a corn "cratch," which the reader will assume is a corncrib or place for storing dried corn, for Pinky's new residence. Here author Peck illustrates some farm construction techniques and wisdom, explaining how Papa and Robert move the corncrib with leverage from a capstan crank, which Peck describes in good detail. As they work, Robert asks his father if he believes in every part of the Shaker Law. Papa says he believes most of it and expresses gratitude that it was written down. Then, realizing that the boy remembers his frequent admission of illiteracy, Papa reveals that he has always listened to scripture readings with "a full heart," knowing that he might never hear the Law read twice.

Robert discloses that he does not believe in the whole of Shaker Law, especially the portion that forbids frills on any day and doubly on Sunday. He wishes he could go watch the local baseball team play on that day, citing the town's most famous person, a baseball player named Abner Doubleday. Robert feels that Doubleday is a much more important person than Ethan Allen, a major historical figure in the Revolutionary War and a former resident of their town, but also notes that he and his history teacher disagree on that subject.

The following discussion is a tongue-in-cheek misunderstanding of history that may make the reader smile. Robert confuses Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys, who were Revolutionary War heroes, with a baseball team, and Papa doesn't have the wherewithal to know any different. Because of this confusion, Papa notes that the study of history seems to lack good sense. Robert then reveals further misunderstanding of his history lesson. His teacher requests homage for someone who lives in a "white house," but Robert is not entirely clear that this really means The White House and the President of the United States.

As Papa and Robert finish setting up the pig's new home, Papa teaches Robert about true riches, not money, but the amplitude of the land and the beauty of their lives. He teaches Robert that everyone is born to do a mission. Papa's mission is to slaughter pigs, both to support his family and to serve the community. On some days, he says, he can hardly bring himself to do it, but he remembers that he has a mission and he keeps working.



Robert spends the night with Pinky in her new home, nestled together beneath the bit of old horse blanket from Mr. Tanner and covered with warm, clean straw. Resting with his new pet, Robert experiences a portion of the gratitude that Papa has expressed, feeling rich indeed.

Chapter 4 Analysis

For readers unfamiliar with Shaker philosophy, this chapter is a treasure trove of Shaker teachings, seasoned with humor resulting from Robert's naive understanding of life and Papa's lack of formal education. At the opening of the chapter, Pinky follows Robert around just as a pet dog or cat would do. The reader may recall here that people often say that pigs make great pets, being intelligent and responsive as good pets are. Robert shows his good character as a farm boy by feeding his animal before he sits down to his own meal.

Although the corncrib is perfectly fine as it is, Papa insists that it be moved since natural law requires a proper distance between cows and pigs. Modern readers may not have the background to understand the following sequence of events, where Papa and Robert construct a capstan crank in order to haul the corncrib a distance from the barn. The father and son dig a hole with a posthole digger and sink a big, thick pole into the hole. Papa fits a handle to the pole just above the ground. Hitching the big ox Solomon to the pole and the chain to the crib, Papa makes a clucking sound and Solomon begins to circle the pole. The laws of physics do the rest.

As the ox does his work, Papa explains aspects of Shaker Law to Robert, pointing out that natural law coincides perfectly with religious law. There follows an amusing discussion of baseball and Vermont history, which Robert seems to have confused in his mind. Since Papa has never read history, he cannot correct Robert. However, the reader can see the flaws in the discussion and may chuckle at the humor here.

When discussing politics, Papa mentions that he did not vote in the presidential election because he cannot read. Robert wonders if society has a prejudice against Shakers that would forbid them to vote, but Papa acknowledges that he did not vote because he was illiterate. Papa knows that people look down on him, thinking he is not intelligent or worthy of their esteem, but he knows that a man's worth is not simply measured by bookish competence. Papa's skill at farming and his personal accountability in the community are also powerful measures of his worth.

Robert wonders if Papa is not "heartsick" at being excluded from the vote, but Papa says no. He tells Robert that instead of feeling left out, he feels abundantly blessed in his life, even to the point of feeling rich. Whenever he has any need, his land and hard work will provide for it. The system works perfectly because Shaker Law requires that every man complete his "mission" in life, his calling, which is the work he was born to do. Papa doesn't always love his mission of slaughtering pigs, but he always steps up to do his part. His example gives Robert the strength to do the same, in a very difficult circumstance, later in the book.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The family travels to church in this chapter, comprised of the parents, son, and their aunt. They ride in a wagon pulled by the ox, Solomon. Later in the day, Robert and Pinky take a walk in the countryside, although Robert takes pains to make sure he doesn't get near the place where he helped Apron deliver her calves. The place has too many painful and fresh memories for the boy.

The countryside seems like a boy's paradise on this April day. Because the snow is melting, there are small streams of water going everywhere. Pinky does what pigs do, which is rooting in the earth, digging around with her snout. She finds a butternut, which is like a walnut, in the earth but she lacks the strength to crack it. Robert cracks it and several subsequent nuts to feed Pinky. Then he sets about making a favorite boyhood construction to play in one of the streams. It is called a waterwheel, an axle with stick paddles that turn around and around in the current.

Pinky is just a baby and doesn't venture away from Robert often. When she does, she often comes scampering back for comfort when scared by a crow or the leap of a frog. Robert considers catching some frogs to feed Pinky. He recalls a joke his father played on him when asked about why one only eats the hind legs of frogs. His father instructed him how to train a frog to jump backwards to develop their front legs. Only after some effort does Robert realize this is a joke.

While hunting frogs, Pinky noses into the water and gets her snout soundly snipped by a crawdad, which is a crayfish, a freshwater version of lobsters. Pinky howls long and loud and the two head home. On the way, Robert notices Apron the cow and her two calves, Bib and Bob. Bob was named after Robert, we learn, and Robert was named after a famous Shaker who long ago fought with local Indians, though he also dressed like Indians himself and did not wear Shaker clothes.

As the sun is setting, Robert hurries home and Pinky keeps pace with him. Mama is waiting for Robert to arrive, not to get him busy with chores as Robert first thinks, but to show him something wonderful, the birth of new kittens in the barn. The cat mother, Miss Sarah, seems very happy to have her new babies, and Mama is happy, too, calling it a "wondrous thing" to have new life. Robert picks up Pinky so she can have a look at the new life as well.

Chapter 5 Analysis

In this chapter, we get to know Robert as a child, a young boy wandering through the countryside, having a good time. He likes having Pinky along as a pet and companion and we see a strong bond of friendship and love developing between the two. Robert has a good time building his waterwheel out of tiny forked sticks. Readers of all ages



may enjoy the description of these homemade toys, spinning in the water, but Pinky doesn't seem to care about the waterwheel.

Instead she follows her natural instinct to forage for food, rooting about with her snout to find butternuts. Pinky is just a baby, content to let Robert feed her, content to stay close to him most of the time. She spooks easily and rushes, squealing, when startled by the caw of a big, black crow. Robert watches the crow catch and kill a frog he sees in the pond. This reminds us that Robert lives in a world very close to life and death, a foreshadowing of the tragic events that finish the book. Rather than dwelling on the negative, however, at this point Robert recalls his father's joke on him, telling him to exercise frogs by teaching them to jump backward. Author Peck doesn't let one forget that sadness is coming soon with these foreshadowing elements, but he also keeps the reader grinning with much humor in the book.

After a brief historical reminiscence, flavored as always by the humor of Robert's innocence and incomplete understanding, Robert rushes home, afraid that he may be arriving late for chores. Again the reader is reminded of the richness and beauty of Robert's simple farm life with the miracle of new life in the form of newborn kittens.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Robert runs home on the last day of school with his report card in his pocket. He is happy to cross the rich, green meadow instead of trudging along the dry, dusty road. He watches a wagon move slowly along the road, followed by a trail of dust that Robert compares to a snake. When the wagon and dusty snake following it move out of sight, it seems to Robert that neither has ever existed.

Robert calls to Pinky as he returns home from school, and here one realizes that ten weeks have passed and that Pinky is not a piglet anymore. She is getting to be a very big pig. Robert loves her so much and feels that she smiles whenever she sees him. As Robert and Pinky near the house, Mama greets them and welcomes Robert home, along with a visiting relative, Aunt Mattie.

Not having looked at his report card first, and assuming that his grades are all good, Robert brings out the card for his mother and aunt to see. He has received all A's, except for a D in English. Aunt Mattie, a former English teacher, nearly dies of a heart attack, Robert thinks, when she sees the D. Although this bad grade seems to be news so bad it could stop the turning of the world, Aunt Mattie announces that there is a remedy, some tutoring.

Here follows a delicious word play where Robert hears the word "tutor" as "tooter," which Robert understands to be playing a cornet or trumpet. He tries to conceal his amusement but finally dissolves into laughter imagining his round, flowery, bejeweled aunt tooting on a trumpet. Aunt Mattie believes that the D in English is no laughing matter. Aunt Mattie sets about giving Robert a grammar lesson, the details of which are enough to make the reader shake with glee. From Aunt Mattie's point of view, it is much less than a success. When Mama asks the aunt how it went, she responds with one of the book's driest and funniest quotes: "Next time, I'll teach the pig."

Chapter 6 Analysis

What makes this chapter work is the difference between how Robert sees the world and how his Aunt Mattie perceives it. By now we know a good deal about Robert and we realize that although he lacks some book intelligence, he is a very smart boy. However, Aunt Mattie does not use the same measuring stick for intelligence. She can hardly survive the news of a D on Robert's report card, particularly since English is the subject she teaches herself. Aunt Mattie's theatrical shock at this poor grade seems to Robert to have become one of the worst sins in the world. Unfortunately, Aunt Mattie's membership in the Baptist church is just such an unpardonable sin to Robert.

When Aunt Mattie first offers to tutor Robert, he is relieved. His friend Jacob Henry calls his cornet, which is a small trumpet, a "tooter," so Robert thinks that he is in for a



pleasant time with music. The idea of his aunt blowing on a tooter, however, is more than he can imagine without gales of laughter, especially when she says she will "tooter" him herself. Aunt Mattie blames Robert's ignorance partly on his religion. If he were a proper Baptist, she thinks, he would never get a D in English. Robert, like others of the Shaker religion, detests Baptists and considers them spawn of Satan, so he knows he's in for a bad time with his Baptist Aunt Mattie.

Aunt Mattie's lesson, complete with confusing prepositions and sentence diagramming that ends up in lines, zigzags, circles, elbow joints, and squiggles, is a complete mystery to Robert, although he tries to show as much respect as he can. He doesn't argue with Aunt Mattie because as a Baptist, she represents Hell and the devil, and you don't argue with darkness. Robert just lets the grammar lesson run its course. Even the touch of the grammar paper, Robert feels, bears the cold touch of evil, having been written on by a Baptist.

Robert escapes outside to his pet Pinky, while Mama and Aunt Mattie talk. The aunt is offended at Robert's ineptitude and huffs away, while Robert thanks his lucky stars that he has escaped this great evil. This is a very funny chapter, revealing Robert's innocence and misunderstanding of the world in a delightful way. One cannot help but laugh at Aunt Mattie, the epitome of the stuffy schoolmarm bent on reforming the world with grammar.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

After a long day of cutting and hauling hay with his father and then doing his own chores, Robert relaxes outdoors with Pinky, lying in the soft grass. Robert observes the natural world as he notes that paintbrush doesn't grow next to clover and other weeds. He also notices that the late-afternoon sun makes the purple clover glow more intensely than during the rest of the day, and it is comfortable to lie in. Like most country boys, Robert knows what wild plants are good to eat as he pulls out the flower shoots and sucks out the nectar. Robert likes the flavor, but Pinky doesn't even try a taste.

Robert observes a red-tailed hawk circling above in the beautiful orange and white sky as sundown approaches. From Robert's point of view, lying in the grass, the hawk seems to stand still in the sky, then suddenly grow larger and larger as it dives. Robert is not worried about the hawk because he knows it will not attack him or Pinky. The hawk, wings folded close to its body, hits hard on the other side of a juniper bush near Robert. It has caught something almost as big as itself, which turns out to be a rabbit, whose pitiful death cry catches Robert's heart.

At this point, the reader does not know why Robert begins to creep slowly up on the hawk and rabbit, still on the ground. As soon as Robert, with Pinky following, gets within a few steps of the hawk, it grasps the rabbit in its talons and takes off flying, close to the ground since the rabbit is so big. Robert breaks into a run, chasing after it. He imagines the hawk and its young tearing up the rabbit, eating it warm and fresh. The boy likes rabbit very much and he imagines that Pinky, being a meat-eater, would like it, too. He recalls that his mother cooks rabbit well.

As the two walk home together, Robert digresses into a rehearsal of how much Pinky is eating and drinking. He notes that Pinky, along with the cow and horse, prefers cold, fresh water, and comments that cows drink after horses, but not horses after cows. He talks aloud to Pinky about how well she is taken care of and imagines that Pinky's snort means "thank you." He takes Pinky into her pen, giving her an extra goodnight hug. He finds one of the kittens at the pen and picks her up to take back to the mother cat. His father is still working outside, mending a harness for Mr. Sander. Together the two watch the sunset and Robert says it's his favorite thing to look at. Papa says that the sky is a good place to look, and probably a good place to go as well.

Chapter 7 Analysis

This chapter reveals Robert's strong connection to the natural world. Although modern young people may not have the chance to lie quietly outside and watch evening slowly come along, Robert enjoys just such a peaceful, timeless moment. He watches the



special, early evening light transform the lowly meadow clover into beautiful radiance, and he knows how to enjoy the taste of it, too.

At first, the hawk above looks lovely and glowing as the clover, kickweed, and paintbrush flowers, but then Robert notices that the hawk is hunting. This episode reminds the reader once again that Robert's world is much wilder and more brutal than most readers'. The boy watches the hawk dive-bomb down to hunt a creature, something big and wild from the sound of it. Robert reveals his tenderness and world-awareness at the same time when he says that a rabbit only makes that heart-rending cry once in its life, when it dies. Hoping to get the rabbit for himself to take home for his mother to transform into a delicious pie, or at least to watch the hawk feed her hungry young, Robert follows for a while, but the hawk moves out of range.

Again the reader will notice details that bond Robert to the natural world and reveal his familiarity with life's brutality. He mentions that some rabbits have rabies, and are not fit to eat, while others make delicious pie. He points out that pigs, being carnivorous, will even eat their own young if they don't get enough protein. His discussion of how animals drink, and how Pinky is growing, reveals his practical nature, a foreshadowing of the expertise he must soon demonstrate once he is the man of the house. When Robert gets home and exchanges a few words about the beauty of the evening with his father, we again get a foreshadowing of Papa's impending death, as the father mentions that being "in the sky" would be good. Although the reader does not yet know that the father is dying, author Peck keeps inserting hints about what is coming.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Robert is awakened in the middle of the night to hard rain, thunder, and yellow light coming from the shed. He hears voices downstairs, of his mother and his Aunt Carrie, and a woman he doesn't immediately recognize. Moving closer, he identifies the voice of a neighbor, Mrs. Hillman. At first, the woman refuses the invitation to enter the house, but finally she comes in. She reveals that her husband has taken a wagon and team and gone out in the night, to "rile" a grave.

As the mother and aunt make tea, Mrs. Hillman speaks about the problem, but from what she says, the reader realizes that Robert really doesn't understand what is going on. However, Papa asks him to get dressed and hitch up the ox to the wagon, which he does, shaking and worried. He joins the grownups in the wagon heading for the church cemetery. Papa tells him that Mr. Hillman is going to desecrate a grave, and Robert asks for a definition of the word. Papa just answers "Dig up."

Arriving at the cemetery, the group finds Mr. Hillman, already digging a deep hole and covered with mud in the rain. As Papa talks with the man, Robert notes that Mr. Hillman's voice is "an illness." Papa actually descends into the hole and helps Mr. Hillman remove a small coffin, leaving the large one there. Mr. Hillman reveals that the baby is his, although it is clear that the dead mother was never his wife, but rather hired help in the home, and a cousin of Robert's family. Mr. Hillman seems to have lost his reason as he shouts that the child is his.

Papa wraps Hillman and Robert in a buffalo robe. As the group drives toward Robert's home, Mr. Hillman talks about feeling better now that he has claimed the child as his own, although he apologizes to Papa for doing wrong to his family. Papa mentions that Mrs. Hillman is at his house and that he wants breakfast, with which Mr. Hillman concurs. Mama strips Robert's clothes off and rubs him down with a flour sack, and then wraps him in a warm blanket from a warming oven. Mr. and Mrs. Hillman drink coffee together and then leave in their own wagon with a baby's coffin riding behind.

Chapter 8 Analysis

This odd episode reminds us that Robert is still a young boy with an imperfect understanding of the world. Awakened from sleep and drawn into an evening's incident that he does not really understand, he accompanies his father and a neighbor to a graveyard, a potentially frightening experience, to find a neighbor digging up a grave. Little by little, the reader understands that the neighbor has had an illegitimate child with a hired girl, who was a cousin to Papa, who tries to help Hillman by working with him to retrieve the small coffin the baby was buried in. They do not disturb the large coffin of the girl, who evidently had died in childbirth.



This chapter reveals the tolerance and kindness of the practice of the Shaker religion, at least as Papa and Mama practice it, though they seem to be strict on many points as well. An intolerant religion would reject the pain of Mr. Hillman and perhaps drive him deeper into despair and madness. Papa and Mama wish to help him, and Mrs. Hillman demonstrates more-than-human forgiveness by allowing Mr. Hillman to go through this experience without adding remonstrance or tears. Because the incident occurs at night, the reader gets the impression that what has happened may stay private within the group. Robert observes the whole thing, but probably does not understand.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

As Robert bathes his pet pig Pinky, he overhears Mama and Aunt Carrie discussing a situation in the neighborhood. Aunt Carrie is outraged that some neighbors are cohabitating without having been married. Mama gently encourages her to mind her own business and points out that the widow in question might benefit from a little loving kindness as well as help on her farm. Aunt Carrie keeps bringing up town gossip and Mama keeps defusing it, finally saying that if the widow and her hired man "giggle in the dark, they can have my blessing."

Robert has had a painful interaction with Widow Bascom, having been broom-handled by her when shortcutting through her yard. Another day, though, she invites Robert to help her carry some heavy flowerpots. Mrs. Bascom rewards him with gingersnaps and buttermilk and as he eats, he meets the hired man in question. His name is Ira Long. Ira has heard of Rob's exploits helping Apron birth her calves and pulling out the goiter. He mentions that the two calves, now grown to fine young oxen, are being taken to the Rutland County Fair. Robert wishes he could take Pinky to the fair.

Back home, Robert is washing Pinky and tells his father, who is watching the proceedings, that he is imagining her winning a ribbon at the fair. Papa says that Mr. Tanner has requested Robert's help with the oxen at the Fair, and that Pinky can go along too. Robert can hardly believe his good fortune, even though he has to muck out the chicken coop before leaving. Papa reminds him that he can have no spending money and that he must provide good help to Mr. Tanner. That night, Robert sleeps out with Pinky in her pen. Along with his mother, he thinks that the Widow Bascom, who suggested to Mr. Tanner that Robert go to the fair, is doing fine with her hired man.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Continuing with the thematic material of the previous chapter, this chapter emphasizes tolerance in the Shaker religion. Mama seems to be practicing her religion when she discourages her sister from gossiping and hopes for all the best for Mrs. Bascom. Papa reveals his gentle side once again by cheerfully allowing Robert to go to the fair, which he knows the boy dearly wants to do. Papa emphasizes the need for worthy behavior when Robert goes, although the reader has the impression that Robert doesn't need to be told. Robert reveals his innocent misunderstanding of the affair by saying that even though having a hired hand at the widow's house may be sinful, he thinks it's good for the woman. The issue of illicit cohabitation is still distant from the young boy's mind.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Although Papa has told Robert that he would have no spending money at the fair, Mama has put aside a dime and gives it to Robert, tied up in a clean white handkerchief, for a ride on a merry-go-round. She also sends him away with a full food basket. As Robert leaves, his father reveals that he himself has never even been to Rutland. Papa hitches up Solomon the ox to take Robert to the Tanners. His last word to Robert, jumping out of the cart, is simply "Manners."

Robert is astonished at the speed that Mr. Tanner's matched horses, Quaker Lady and Quaker Gent, pull the cart. Noticing that Mr. Tanner has paired horses and paired oxen, Robert almost asks why he doesn't get a matching wife as well, but Papa's last word stops him. "Never miss a chance," Papa has said, "to keep your mouth shut."

Arriving at the fairgrounds, Robert reveals his innocence in humorous ways. He watches Mrs. Tanner rush off to the "restroom," although Robert says he doesn't feel like resting himself. Because the restrooms are labeled "Ladies" and "Gents," Robert believes they must have something to do with Mr. Tanner's horses, so he looks for one labeled "Pinky" as well. When Mrs. Tanner warns him about perverts in the restrooms, Robert figures out that perverts must have something to do with grammar, since his mother and aunt have discussed the word. He keeps looking around for a pervert but doesn't seem to be able to find one.

Robert helps Mr. Tanner hitch up the oxen to be photographed and Tanner describes the exploding photographic equipment. Then they take the oxen to be shown at the fair. Robert proudly leads them around the ring, after a moment's stage fright and a poke from behind from Mr. Tanner. When the crowd claps and shouts and asks questions, Robert suffers from a moment of ungodly pride. Just then, Mrs. Tanner rushes up to take Robert to the children's exhibit so he can show Pinky.

Pinky has somehow soiled her shoulder with a big spot of dung. Robert is horrified, but Mr. Tanner says not to worry, that soap and water will get her clean. The problem is that Robert cannot find any soap anywhere. He finally spends his precious ten cents on a bar of saddle soap in a tack room. Although it seems to take forever to wash Pinky, they make it in time for the exhibition.

After rushing to get Pinky to the ring, Robert is covered with sweat and feeling uncomfortable. He catches a whiff of the stinky manure just washed from Pinky, which, combined with the stress and effort of the whole affair, makes Robert weak and sick. Pinky behaves beautifully circling the ring, and although Robert is ready to upchuck and pass out, he notices the judge put a ribbon on Pinky. Then he throws up, right at the feet of the judge, actually getting a little on his shoe. Mr. Tanner catches Robert and takes



him safely to Pinky's pen, where Robert rests in the clean straw. Robert notices that Pinky has a blue ribbon around her neck. She has won First Prize for Best Behaved Pig.

Chapter 10 Analysis

In this chapter, Robert interacts with the larger world outside his family. Mr. Tanner has engaged Robert to be a helping hand, but he also treats Robert with respect and camaraderie. The reader sees a new side of Mama as she secretly slips Robert a dime without Papa knowing it. Robert shows his delight at moving quickly, pulled by a matched pair of fast horses. He likes passing the other travelers on the road.

When the group arrives at the fair, however, Robert continues to reveal his boyish innocence. He does not understand why Mrs. Tanner is rushing so fast to "rest" at a restroom and comments at how amazing it is that a big woman like Mrs. Tanner can move so fast just to rest. The humorous discourse on perverts as well as the interlude with the photographer show the reader yet again that Robert has much to learn. When the flash goes off, Robert is looking right at it. He calls it an exploding snow shovel and he feels provoked that the flash of light has deprived him of his sight for a while, so engaged is he in seeing everything new at the fair.

Knowing full well that he must avoid a prideful heart, Robert nonetheless cannot avoid wishing that everyone he knows, especially his friends and his sweetheart, Becky Tate, could see him leading the paired oxen around the exhibition ring. He is proud to answer questions from people on the sidelines. After the demonstration, Mrs. Tanner runs up, wheezing with the effort, hoping to get Robert and Pinky to the children's exhibit in time. Here the reader sees her character as compassionate as well as humorous; she is a likeable and kind woman.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Tanner demonstrate these qualities when they work hard to clean up a manure stain from Pinky's shoulder so she can show well. They care about Robert's success as well as their own. The strong smell of the manure has a powerfully negative effect on Robert. He is already exhausted by running around looking for soap, and rushing to get Pinky to the ring on time. The reader understands that Robert is probably overpowered by all the excitement as well. When Robert throws up near the judge's feet, Mr. Tanner takes charge and kindly helps him back to a quiet place. All three of them are delighted when Pinky wins a prize, though the reader may smile at Mrs. Tanner's insistence that she get to a quiet place to remove her corset.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Returning from the county fair, Robert's parents greet him and the Tanners in the dark. Mr. and Mrs. Tanner assure Papa and Mama that Robert was a great help and Jack informs his parents that Pinky won the prize for best-behaved pig. At that moment, Papa and Robert sort out the debt the boy incurred by being late, including making up for missed chores and repaying the feed that the pig had consumed. Robert reenacts the whole scenario, omitting, however, his bout of "vapors," which he calls the vomiting spell. Robert would talk all night, but Mama sends everyone to bed.

During the night, a weasel gets into the chicken coop and kills one of the hens, which means chicken for supper. Papa catches the weasel and puts him in a sack. He informs Robert that he wants to "weasel" a neighbor's young female dog, the bitch terrier belonging to Brother Long. Robert knows little about weaseling a dog and asks his father about it. Papa replies that it is a method to make dogs hate weasels.

The men put the dog into a barrel and add the weasel, closing the lid. Robert is told to hold down the lid, listening to the howling, biting, and scratching. At the outset, the boy thinks it will be an exciting episode but soon he becomes disgusted and ashamed to be participating in it. When the noise dies down, the men take off the lid and pull out the dog, which is torn almost to pieces. Robert is horrified. He insists that Mr. Long kill the pup, and Papa agrees, going to get his gun. After he shoots the dog, Robert buries it. Papa vows he will never participate in a weasling again as the boy says a prayer.

Chapter 11 Analysis

In this chapter, the reader sees Robert as a boy, freshly home from the fair, full of a detailed account of all he's seen and done. Robert is becoming a man, refusing from here on to participate in a bloody and heartless farm practice. Robert's father agrees, which bonds them together further in adult behavior.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Back from their county fair adventure, Robert and Pinky must settle down to business. Robert sees his father come home from work, covered with blood and guts from pig killing, reeking of the slaughter. When Robert asks him why he is so dirty, seeing as he wears an apron, Papa replies that dying and being born are both a dirty business. Papa mentions that Pinky should have come into heat by this time, but he has not observed it. He wonders if Pinky is barren. Robert asks if that is the same as their aunt who cannot bear children, but Papa warns him to speak softly so as not to hurt his aunt's feelings.

Robert knows the significance of Pinky being barren. It means that Pinky must soon be slaughtered for food, which is abhorrent to the boy, since he loves his pet pig. His mother asks him to go squirrel hunting in order to get a big gray squirrel. Robert ranges over the hillside, looking at the beautiful goldenrod in the autumn light. Finally, sighting a gray squirrel, he shoots it, grabs it, flings it against a tree to break his back, and takes it home. He guts the squirrel and removes the paunch to take to his mother, who wants the chewed-up nuts inside. She spreads them out carefully on a handkerchief to dry above the warming oven. Robert knows there is chocolate cake coming, since his mother only asks for a gray squirrel to get the nuts for chocolate cake.

Feeding the chickens the scraps of the squirrel, Papa and Robert discuss the apple harvest, which is poor. Robert had smoked the tree to kill the spanner worm caterpillars, but on discussion, the two agree that he'd done it wrong. This means a poor apple harvest, and less to eat for the winter. Papa points out that good farming reveals the character of the farmer. Robert comments that he doesn't want to grow up to be like any other farmer, but rather like Papa. His father reaffirms that he wants Robert to get a good education and to use modern farming methods.

Going into the house, Papa mentions the bad smell that comes from being a butcher and that Mama has never complained about it. After dinner the family does indeed have chocolate cake, sprinkled with the dried walnuts gleaned from the squirrel's crop. After dinner, Robert mentions that he needs a new winter coat, and Papa recommends that he mention it to his mother so she can begin sewing it. Robert wishes for a new store coat, but Papa reminds him that Shakers do things the old way. When Robert asks why they have to be Plain People, Papa simply replies that that is who they are. His son can have a new store-bought coat when he earns one. He reminds Robert that he will be a man one day. When Robert replies, "Someday," Papa says that no, it will be soon, for he is dying. He doesn't want to go see the doctor because all things must die and he knows it is his time.

Robert stays up after this conversation, watching his father get a hot rock from the fireplace and put it in a sack so he can warm his bed. He thinks about the prospect of losing his father to death, knowing that it would put him in charge of the farm, since his



older sisters are married and his aunt is too old to take the job. He watches the cinders turn from red to gray, keeping them company so they do not have to "die alone."

Chapter 12 Analysis

It is foreshadowed that Robert will soon have to be in charge of things when he and Papa realize that the smoking Robert did on the orchard to kill pests had been done improperly, causing a poor harvest. Papa doesn't remonstrate Robert about it but remains calm and loving, another reflection of Shaker ways. Although Papa is committed to many old-fashioned things, he demonstrates in this chapter that he wants his son to benefit from a good modern education, including modern farming ways. When Robert expresses a natural longing for clothing that will help him fit in with his peers, Papa reaffirms his commitment to Shaker simplicity, adding that Robert will need to grow up sooner rather than later, because Papa is dying.

Robert simply doesn't want to believe this. He says he does not believe it. However, he sits up much later than bedtime to mull over things and watch the fire die, a delicate foreshadowing of his father's coming death. Thus the reader sees that although Robert refuses to accept his father's impending death, something inside him knows it is true.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

As autumn turns into a dark winter, Papa works with Robert to feed Pinky richer food to force estrus, but nothing seems to be happening. Robert asks Mr. Tanner to check on Pinky, and he arrives at the farm. Tanner has his boar, Sampson, in the wagon, and tells Robert that a boar can tell if a pig is in estrus even if people cannot. Robert has to drive Pinky into a pen, and Tanner greases Pinky's rear end with a handful of lard. As the two wait for Samson to mount Pinky, they make a business deal. As a stud fee, Robert promises Tanner two of the pick of the litter. Because Robert is the pig's owner, he enters into his first mature business deal.

True to form, Samson mounts Pinky and mates with her. Robert thought he would be happy for this because it would mean that Pinky could have babies and then she would survive with a long and happy life. But watching the act, Robert hates Samson for his brutal male intrusion on Pinky. Since he is bigger and stronger than the pig, Samson prevails over Pinky, as Tanner points out. It is the way of things. Pinky squeals pitifully the whole time, and when it is all over, Pinky is bruised and has blood running down her leg.

Afterwards, Tanner and Robert stand around and talk a bit. Tanner asks pointedly after Papa's health, but Robert keeps saying that his Papa is fine. Tanner points out that when Pinky takes her proper place on the farm, she'll birth as many as a hundred pigs to sell as hogs, enough to pay off the farm. At first the prospect of this much profit dizzies Robert, but then he remembers plain Shaker ways and wonders if he should be so greedy for so much. Here he learns that Tanner is not a Shaker but a Baptist, and Robert laughs to himself that three people who love him more than anyone in the world, the Tanners and his Aunt Mattie, are all hateful Baptists! Maybe he is wrong about them, and other things, too.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Chapter thirteen seems to be a pivotal point in Robert's life. Instead of dealing with Tanner as a boy might, Robert agrees to pay a proper adult's share for the stud fee from Pinky's anticipated litter. This farm boy is no stranger to reproduction and other farm realities, but it pains him to observe the rank boar Samson repeatedly plunging into his pet pig Pinky. This is another reminder that Robert must accept many new realities as he grows from boy to man.

Here Peck begins to refer to Mr. Tanner as Ben, which is a bit confusing at first until the reader realizes that Robert is stepping into a man's role, where two men would call each other by their first names. Ben reminds Robert that he will someday be the man in charge of the farm, since two of Robert's brothers have died and two sisters are gone



and married. When Ben talks about big dollars being available from Pinky's offspring, it makes Robert's head spin. Immediately he backs off and mentions that he should not be wanting for much, since he is a Shaker. He asks Ben Tanner if he too is a Shaker, but Ben laughs and denies it, claiming he and his wife are Baptists. Robert has grown up abhorring Baptists, but realizing that some of his most beloved relationships are with Baptists, knows that he is wrong and foolish. This realization again signals maturity.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

The Peck family does not have enough food to eat for the winter, partly because the apple crop was bad and partly because Papa cannot hunt effectively because he doesn't own a proper deer rifle. Papa, despite his ill health, has sat outside in the cold and even the rain, waiting for a deer to pass by, but it has not happened. When Pinky never comes into estrus, much less gestates a litter of pigs, the family knows what has to be done, even though it is not spoken aloud until one Saturday morning, when Papa tells Robert that they should go "get it done."

Papa readies the tools and Robert fetches Pinky out of her pen. Neither has had much appetite for their breakfast earlier. Even at the last moment, Robert betrays his boyishness by wishing that something could happen to save his beloved pet. For the first time the reader sees the details of Papa's work of slaughtering pigs, as he kills Pinky. As Papa does this bloody work, he keeps turning Robert around so the son does not have to observe the killing of his pet.

Robert cries, and the reader assumes Papa does, too, since he is breathing very fast indeed. When Robert says that his heart is "broke," we believe Papa when he says that his heart is broken, too. The boy cries and the father waits until his son's grief is cried out. Papa reminds Robert that being a man is doing what needs to be done. Papa strokes his son's cheek gently with his hand, still smeared with Pinky's blood, and Robert kisses his father's hand, which then moves to wipe tears from his eyes, the only time Robert has ever seen his father cry.

Chapter 14 Analysis

This may be the most heartrending chapter in the book as Papa kills Robert's beloved pet, knowing as he does it that he is taking away from his son the one thing that the boy has loved and nurtured on his own. The worsening weather of the coming winter calls attention to the fact that things are getting hard on the Peck farm, Papa is ill, there is not enough food, and Pinky must provide that food for the family.

When the Saturday arrives for Pinky's slaughter, the reader sees the portending event because Robert, normally a healthy eater, cannot stomach his breakfast. When the father asks Robert to come help him, Robert knows what it means. Although the reader has never read the details of Papa's work, which is slaughtering pigs, in this chapter all is revealed. This includes the preparation of tools, the boiling of water, the smashing of Pinky's skull, and the cutting of the neck artery.

Author Peck compares this slaughter to Christmas morning, pointing up the sacrifice involved here. Papa deliberately works fast to spare Robert any more pain than must be suffered. Robert realizes that his father is pushing himself very hard because of his



father's fast breathing. The boy knows that the father's hands must be nearly freezing off.

Finally the reader receives the full impact of the father's understanding and the boy's forgiveness when Robert kisses his father's hand, the hand that killed his beloved pet, still wet with blood and pig fat, over and over again. Here the father cries, the only occasion Robert has ever seen him cry. Papa knows what he has required of his son and that the son has shown great maturity in giving up his pet for the survival of the family.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

In this chapter, Papa dies as spring comes. Robert finds him dead early one morning before chores, and gently tells his father that he need not worry about doing the chores, that the boy will do them himself. After the chores are done, Robert informs his mother and aunt about the death and asks them to attend to details preparing for the funeral while he summons the coroner, who is a faithful Shaker and not as expensive as the county coroner. The Shaker community has donated the coffin, a simple wood box typical of Shaker simplicity.

Mama thanks Robert for taking care of everything, but Robert reminds her that one does what is necessary. He arranges for the funeral and digs the grave in the family plot in the orchard. Robert finds it difficult to occupy himself during the afternoon. He wanders into the tackroom where Papa had kept his tool and notices that Papa's work has burnished the plain wood to a beautiful gold. He finds an old piece of Paper where Papa has practiced writing his name, although he never has learned to read.

Preparing for the funeral, Robert finds that he has outgrown all his clothes and complains to God about poverty. A few neighbors arrive for the home funeral, a "day no pigs would die," since Papa is gone. Papa is laid out in the parlor but not for a viewing, of which Robert approves. Since Robert is the eldest son, he must say a few words about his father, which he does with elegance and confidence. The neighbors carry the box out to the grave and it is lowered into the ground, though the ropes are removed since burying ropes with a coffin is against Shaker tradition.

Robert shovels in the first two shovels of dirt but the neighbors fill in the rest. Faithful to Shaker tradition there is no headstone or marker. Returning to the house, the Tanners promise Robert any help he needs and Robert graciously thanks them. Mr. Tanner remarks that Robert sounds just like his father, and Robert says that he "aims to" be like his dad. He does the evening chores that night but cannot quite settle down to go into the house, so he finds himself walking in the orchard. He tells his father "goodnight" and thanks him for the years they had together.

Chapter 15 Analysis

The sad fact of Papa's death is given in a very quiet and understated way as this chapter begins, without a hint of the long and perhaps hungry winter, and the long pain of Papa's illness, both for the father and for his family. When Robert realizes that for the first time, his father is not up doing chores before the son, he knows the sad truth of his father's death. Quietly and powerfully he takes over the position of man of the house, as though he already knows how to do it, which he does from observing his father for his whole life.



Robert also demonstrates his capacity for understanding symbol and meaning when he points out that his father's tools, which were instruments of death, were actually burnished with the gold of honest labor, despite their grisly use. Sorting through his father's belongings, he happens upon a paper full of his father's signatures, as his father has practiced in private to achieve some level of literacy.

Although Robert expects but few to attend the funeral, he is heartened and gladdened by the neighbors who attend. Still young and maturing, he can't help but notice that many of them are not dressed any better than he, and that they too struggle with the burden of poverty. Robert prepares for the actual shoveling of the earth but can't bring himself to participate after the first two obligatory shovelfuls as the head of the house.

Robert kindly and maturely takes care of his mother and aunt and does all the chores, but he still has time left to himself. He says that he doesn't really know why he goes out to the orchard then, but the reader knows that Robert needs closure with his father. He says only a few words, but as he turns away from the grave, it is clear that he is ready to take his place as an adult, however young he still is.



Characters

Robert Peck

Robert Peck is the main character of the novel, the one in whose voice the story is told. Because Robert Peck is also the author of the book, the reader understands that the author is telling the story of his own boyhood. However, there is neither self-indulgence nor over-sentimentality here. Robert the boy reveals his weaknesses and immaturity without discomfort. The author seems to enjoy a good chuckle over the boy Robert's naivety even though the joke is really upon himself.

Because Robert is the product of a religious upbringing in a small sect, the Shakers, at thirteen he demonstrates personal accountability, appropriate courtesy, commitment, and honoring one's parents. Even so, because he thoroughly knows that his father loves him, he will challenge some of the religious teachings, such as the requirement to have no fun on the Sabbath. When young Robert has questions, such as why pigs and cows may not lodge close to each other, he is comfortable asking his father. This implies individual thought and confidence.

The boy Robert shares many things in common with other twelve-year-olds. He loves to roam the hills around his home and having a pet of his own. He longs for adventures beyond the confines of his home, so he jumps at the chance to attend the county fair, which even his father has never done. He is confident that his parents and neighboring adults care about him, but because the religion provides so many strictures, he is always grateful and excited when he gets a chance to try new things.

Robert is different from many of today's twelve-year-olds in that he works very hard and never complains. He does the kind of work that many of today's adults don't even do, hard physical labor on a farm. Part of the reason he works so hard is that he has been trained to do so, but part of it is to relieve his parents of undue hardship. This is a lovable and admirable part of his character. When the time comes for Robert to take his place as man of the house, though he is only thirteen, his previous experience with hard labor enables him to do so.

Haven Peck

Haven Peck is Robert's father, the source of most of Robert's training and many times Robert's hero. Haven Peck is an important part of his community because he slaughters the pigs necessary for protein in the small religious community's economy. Throughout the book, he is mostly referred to as Papa because the book is told from Robert's point of view. Although Papa never shirks from his labor, it becomes clear that he does not love the slaughter of pigs. He wishes he did not stink of death, although he is happy that his wife never complains about it. Robert notices that Papa seems to be yearning for something more than what he has in his life.



Papa possesses a large store of wisdom and experience. Some of it is true and useful while some of it is pure folklore and superstition. Even though Papa seems very strict at times, his love for his son and his wife constantly show through. He is an ideal role model for Robert, while at the same time insisting that Robert obtain an education so he can surpass his father in the type of work he becomes qualified to do. The counterpoint between Haven's mode of making a living, which is death, and his eventual death at the end of the book, is a powerful part of this story.

Mama

Robert's mother appears far less in the story than does his father. The reader sees her cooking for the family, providing comfort and encouragement, and doing her part in the care of the home. The few appearances she makes, however, reveal her to be a woman of depth and humor. She cares for Robert as a beloved son, as when he comes home injured from helping Apron the cow, or when he returns home chilled from helping with Sebring Hillman in the rain in the middle of the night.

Mr. and Mrs. Tanner

The Tanners are close neighbors to the Pecks and provide one of Robert's first windows to the outside world. They are not Shakers but rather feared and detested Baptists. Robert is astonished when he sees them eating and drinking much more freely than he is accustomed to in the rigorous practice of the Shaker religion, which may also be colored by poverty as well. Despite Robert's amazement, he does not hesitate to enjoy the generous offer of cookies from Mrs. Tanner. At the fair, the Tanners use Robert's labor in displaying their livestock but reveal charming and humorous humanity in their commitment to having Pinky the pig also displayed. They put out a great deal of effort to that end, which endears them to the reader as well as to Robert. Along with Robert's Aunt Mattie, the Tanners demonstrate to Robert that people of other religions can be wonderful.

Aunt Mattie

Aunt Mattie, sister to Mama, only appears in one chapter, but it is a funny appearance. Aunt Mattie is a schoolteacher and cannot abide a low grade in English on Robert's report card, since English is her subject. The chapter in which she attempts to tutor Robert is almost slapstick in its misunderstandings, which include Robert's alarm at having to deal with the devil in the form of his aunt, as well as humorous misunderstandings of words.

Pinky

Pinky is Robert's pet pig. Since the boy has never had a pet, he adores his pig. Readers may already know that pigs are considered as intelligent and loving as dogs, so in many



ways Pinky is an ideal companion for Robert. He takes good care of her. Robert's father participates in the care of the pig, but since he deals with pigs as part of making a living, the reader will see foreshadowing in the fact that Pinky is a pig, not another type of pet such as a dog or a pony. Pinky's death prefigures Papa's death at the end of the book.

Aunt Carrie

Aunt Carrie is Robert's maiden aunt, an elderly woman who lives in his home. Her presence in the family is a quiet reminder that the Shakers take care of their own. Aunt Carrie is important to Robert once especially in the book, when she slyly hands him a dime wrapped tightly in a handkerchief, to ride the merry-go-round at the county fair or save as he sees fit. Robert ends up buying a sliver of soap to wash Pinky before she is judged. Aunt Carrie is very strict and judgmental, a counterpoint to Papa and Mama.

Widow Bascom and the Handyman

During the first part of this book, the reader may get the idea that Papa, Haven Peck, is a religiously inflexible man, unfairly strict with his son and perhaps with his neighbors, too. Early on we see that Papa is also very loving and kind. Mama is perhaps even more open-minded and kind than anyone in the family. When the family discusses a neighbor lady widowed over a year ago, Aunt Carrie is harsh and critical about the handyman who takes care of the property and has been heard to giggle in the dark with the widow. Mama responds that both of them are probably much happier and that they deserve some joy in this life, and Papa agrees.

Mr. and Mrs. Hillman

In one of the darker episodes of this book, the Pecks awake one stormy night by a knock from a distraught neighbor, Mrs. Hillman. At first she does not even accept the family's invitation to enter the house, but soon comes in and explains that her husband is in trouble. Mama sits Mrs. Hillman down to have a cup of tea while Papa and Robert ride out in the rain to the graveyard to find Mr. Hillman, who is digging up a grave. Mr. Hillman has had an illicit affair with a young girl, a relative of the Pecks. The girl and her illegitimate child are dead, having perished in childbirth. Mr. Hillman explains that he is not going to disturb the girl's remains but wants to give his child a proper burial. Papa helps him retrieve the tiny corpse and takes it to his property to bury it, at the same time convincing Mr. Hillman to accompany him home. In a religious community, such sinners might be shunned, but the Pecks manifest kind regard for these suffering souls.



Objects/Places

Apron the Cow

The birthing cow sets up the reader's understanding of Robert's character and the important receipt of Pinky the pig as a pet. Although Apron is brutal, Robert continues to help her.

Pinky's Corncrib Home

Pinky's little home shows Robert and his father's dedication to doing things right. It takes a lot of labor and preparation to set it up, but the two stick to it until it's done. Because Robert loves his pet so much, he sometimes sleeps with her out in the corncrib home.

The Pecks' Home

Most of this story takes place on the Pecks' farm, which is small and efficient but not altogether predictable nor productive. The Pecks are members of the Shaker religion but it is not a communal undertaking, so the Pecks must rely on the farm. When Robert doesn't correctly smoke the trees to eliminate caterpillars, the whole family suffers from lack of food.

Rutland County Fair

At the fair Robert experiences the wider world for the first time. Because his everyday experience is so limited, he is nearly deafened with the noise and bustle of the fair. He experiences validation as a worthwhile individual outside his family for the first time at the Rutland Fair.

Weaseling the Dog

The incident with weaseling the dog is one of Robert's first departures from common practice. The weasel is thought to be a universal enemy but Robert perceives weaseling as incorrect, though his father and neighbors have long accepted it.

Papa's Tools

At the end of the story, Robert sees nobility and beauty in his father's tools of death, as they are made golden by his father's hard work.



The Coffin

Papa's coffin is made by neighbors and donated to the family. It is lowered into the ground by ropes, which are then removed, partly from religious tradition and partly for the practical use they will receive later.

Samson the Boar

Robert pins all his hopes on Pinky reproducing and giving birth to many valuable piglets, so Samson the boar is a necessary part of the scheme. Robert finds him very scary when he actually appears to mate his pet pig. Although Robert is accustomed to the realities of reproduction, life, and death on the farm, when he actually sees Samson mate with his pet, he hates him for his brutal masculinity.

The Apple Orchard

Before the final episode of slaughtering Pinky the pig, the moment that introduces Robert into manhood, the family realizes that winter food will be scarce. Robert realizes that he has done an inadequate job protecting the family apple orchard from worms. When his father explains how it should have been done, there is no blame assigned, but everyone knows that Robert's failure will contribute to the scarcity that winter, another reminder that Robert is approaching full responsibility as a man.

The Hawk

When Robert's mother sends him out to kill a gray squirrel in order to harvest the ground-up walnuts in it, Robert takes Pinky with him. They spend some time exploring in the wild before finding and killing the squirrel. Robert describes in detail the powerful descent of a hawk on a rabbit. This hawk represents true, wild freedom, including life, in the form of the nestlings the mother hawk might be feeding, and death, in the form of the rabbit that the hawk kills.

Setting

Peck recounts many of his boyhood experiences in *A Day No Pigs Would Die*; he even uses his own name for the main character. The story takes place in rural Vermont in the late 1920s. Rob Peck and his family live on a farm outside the small village of Learning. The closest town of any size is Rutland, the county seat. To Rob, the only member of his family to ever see Rutland, it is the biggest city in the world.

The Pecks are Shakers. Members of this religious sect call themselves Plain People and do not believe in frills of any sort. Although poor in terms of money, the Pecks consider themselves rich in love and land. They have no horses to pull their wagon to Rutland, but they have a strong ox for chores and are proud that they have worked hard for their farm, which they will own outright in five years.



Social Sensitivity

Peck spares nothing in his realistic picture of farm life. Some critics feel Peck is too violent and too pessimistic in his view of the imminence of death.

Others find the realism refreshing. He presents and accepts nature for what it is.

The mating scene between Pinky and boar is straightforward but not offensive. The brutal details of Pinky's death are not gratuitous; they help the reader understand Rob's reaction to his father.

Peck refers to sex in several instances but only in passing. Rob's four sisters have been "wedded and bedded," a colloquialism for "married." A married neighbor has had an affair that drives his girlfriend to drown their baby and hang herself. A widow woman and her hired man giggle in the dark. Rob does not pass judgment on these people but matter-of-factly accepts them, without giving their sexual lives any further thought.



Literary Qualities

Rob tells his story in the first person, describing his adventures and feelings, and this technique works well. The writer employs colorful dialect to capture the boy's pattern of speech, including sayings familiar to rural Vermont: "true as taproot," "falling fast as a stone," "soldier still," and "wrong as sin on Sunday." Rob tells his story as if he were talking out loud, occasionally using sentence fragments in the narrative as well as in the dialogue. This effective technique makes the narrative flow smoothly and seem more realistic.

The author does not provide many details about his characters' physical appearances, but he includes a wealth of detail about their mannerisms and attitudes. His clear analysis deftly reveals the workings of their minds. The author uses strong verbs and strong nouns; his vivid descriptions do not become flowery. The emotions he wrings from the reader are a tribute to his fine writing talent.

Through each of Rob's experiences, the reader sees him mature. The mating scene between Pinky and the boar Samson is graphic but not tasteless. The butchering of Pinky is detailed through the eyes of a heartbroken boy who helps kill his pet. Funeral arrangements for his father are made by a stunned, but strong young man who does what has to be done. Each experience shows a different side to Rob's character. The author skillfully blends them all together so that a clear picture of the protagonist emerges.



Themes

Becoming a Man

Throughout the book author Peck presages Robert taking his place as a man in the world around him. To modern readers, this entry into adulthood seems very premature, since adulthood is universally considered to be reached at around age eighteen. However, early on, Robert takes on mature responsibilities. When his efforts fail, such as treating the apple trees for pests, the result affects the whole family. The group relies on Robert's work. He must rise early every morning and do what seems to be a half-day's work before he goes to school.

Robert must participate in the adult world even if he doesn't understand what is going on, such as the night that he must help bring a neighbor and relative, Sebring Hillman, home from the graveyard where he is digging up his dead baby and lover. When Robert's family discusses a neighboring widow's affair with her hired man, the boy faces a conflict between strict religious ideas and the more human consideration of Widow Bascom's personal happiness. A subtheme of this is Robert becoming his *own* man. At times he disagrees with his father and with the prevailing religious view. The reader observes that the Shaker religion seems to support this kind of individuated questioning.

Love for Family

Throughout the book, the Pecks demonstrate an unwavering love for each other. Papa puts aside his reasonable dislike of his bloody occupation in order to provide for his family. Mama labors hard all day long to take care of feeding and clothing the family. Everything they do has a significant personal cost in time and effort. When Robert is sick or hurt, the parents do everything they can to care for him. Because Mama has an unmarried sister, Aunt Carrie, the family cheerfully makes her part of the household. Robert evidences this love for family by doing all the work he does, even though a child his age might naturally chafe at the time and effort involved. Robert never seems to question it. He particularly works hard because he wants to help his father.

Papa reveals significant inflexibility in living according to the Shaker religion. Because he cannot read, he must rely on remembering the word read aloud. Even with his commitment to the religion, however, he sometimes softens in order to accommodate his family. At first he does not want to accept the pig as payment for Robert's service to a neighbor, but he sees how much Robert wants the pet and allows himself to be talked into it. He lets Robert attend the county fair with neighbors even though he himself has never enjoyed the luxury. When Papa realizes that Pinky the pig is barren and eating up precious resources, he still tries hard to improve her condition so he won't have to kill his son's dear pet. When Papa finally must take the pig's life in order to provide food for the family, he weeps along with his son at this terrible loss. When Robert must step up



and take his place as head of the family, he does so without hesitation because he loves them so much.

Religion in Daily Life

The Shaker religion no longer exists, but once was a powerful influence in Vermont and other areas. The Pecks are members of this religion and although the reader will never get to see Sunday services in the book, the influence of the religion abounds throughout nonetheless. In the opening scene, Robert stays with the brutal cow and helps her give birth and also relieves her of a goiter simply because his spiritual values require him to complete the job. When the neighbor offers Robert a piglet as payment, Papa almost doesn't allow the gift because the religion requires people to help each other freely. Even when Papa stretches the rules, such as taking milk from a wandering cow while camping; he attributes the act to understanding the Lord's lenience with people.

Papa wants Robert to be able to read not only to advance himself but also to be able to read the Book of Shaker, which Papa has never been able to do because of his illiteracy. Even though Papa is thoroughly committed to strictly obeying the religion, he is still willing to bend the rules to help someone else, such as his relative who is driven nearly mad by the death of an illicit lover and their baby. He is willing to turn a blind eye to an affair of a neighbor widow because he can see it makes her happy and it also helps her keep up the farm and land.

Papa views the proper tending of land as a religious expression. He believes that one can tell the character of a farmer by seeing how he tends his land. He has instilled these beliefs into his son, who at the same moment dreams of good profits from Pinky while at the same time doubting if wanting those profits can be right. Although the reader may not agree with such a religious point of view, it is still endearing to observe it in these simple people whose lives are ruled by it.

On occasion Papa explicates what the religion means to him. Early in the book he points out that the family, though seeming to be poor, is truly wealthy, having land, animals to work it, food from the animals and the work of their hands, rain to drink and wash, and just as important, beauty all around to look at and take joy from. When Robert sort of doubts all that, Papa reinforces that everyone is born to do a mission. Papa's mission is to support the family by slaughtering pigs, and Robert's mission is to do his chores. This single-minded devotion to duty is tempered by Papa and Robert's experience of joy and beauty in the land and surroundings.



Themes/Characters

Twelve years old when the story begins, Rob is a boy with a good sense of responsibility. When the story ends, Rob is thirteen and a man, the male head of the household. Rob narrates the story, and in addition to relating his thoughts, he tells of his interactions with several people who influence him.

Members of Rob's family have the most influence on him. Haven Peck, his father, kills pigs for a living. A man of common sense, hard work, and honesty, he cannot read or write but is determined that Rob will be able to do both well. The story focuses on the relationship between father and son. Rob characterizes his mother when he says, "I could smell her goodness." She works hard in the home and in the garden and never says a harsh word about anyone.

Her oldest sister, Aunt Carrie, lives with the Peck family. She has never married and always seems a bit shocked by the community gossip she so enjoys. She claims an aunt's prerogative and slips Rob ten cents to use for fun when he goes to the Rutland Fair.

The Pecks' neighbors also affect Rob's development as he approaches manhood. Mr. Tanner, the nearest neighboring farmer, gives Rob a little pig, Pinky, in return for helping his prize cow have her calf. He also takes Rob to the Rutland Fair so he can show Pinky in the children's division. The Pecks consider Mr. Tanner to be a good neighbor and a good friend. Other minor characters introduced during various escapades include the widow Bascom and her hired man, the close family friend Rob calls Aunt Matty, and Mr. and Mrs. Hillman, all of whom contribute to Rob's growing up.

Animals are of special importance on a farm, and Rob names and befriends all the animals in his life. The little pig he raises is the first thing that ever wholly belongs to him, and Pinky becomes crucial to the development of the story. Rob talks to Pinky, sharing his most private thoughts and harboring high hopes that Pinky will raise litter after litter of offspring. When Rob realizes that Pinky is barren, he faces the truth that there will be no pigs and no future for Pinky. The Pecks have a bad autumn: the apple crop fails and Mr. Peck fails to kill a deer for the winter's meat. Rob knows that his pig must be sacrificed so the family can eat. He helps slaughter his pet, the hardest thing he ever has to do. He cries and his father cries with him.

Rob and his father enjoy an ideal parent-child relationship. Rob questions his father and sometimes disagrees with him, but he always regards his father with an underlying love and deep respect. When he helps his father kill Pinky, Rob experiences a brief moment of blind fury during which he hates his father. When sanity returns, Rob realizes his father has made the right choice between feeding his family and letting the pig live. Rob kisses the very hand with which his father destroyed the pet, showing that he understands and that he loves him. It is the only time Rob ever sees his father cry.



The struggle to step across the boundary of childhood to adulthood remains the same through the ages. The trappings, the clothing styles, and the modes of transportation change, but emotions remain the same. Growing up and facing adult responsibilities is not easy. The author never preaches this theme, yet he effectively gets the point across by relating Rob's experiences. Rob Peck faces the future with the confidence of youth. He has flashes of insight well beyond his years and misconceptions that can be blamed only on inexperience. Rob's growth, his crossing the boundary into adulthood, helps readers better understand their own struggles.

In the final scene, when Haven Peck dies, Rob takes over as head of the household with a calmness and maturity lacking in many adults. For those who have followed his growth from youth to manhood, it is not surprising that Rob exhibits such strength of character.



Style

Point of View

This book is told straightforwardly from the point of view of Robert Peck, the boy who is also the adult author. There is a great deal of humor realizing that the author deliberately writes from the boy's limited point of view even though as a grownup he knows better. For example, Robert has suffered from the ill temper of the Widow Bascom when she whacks him hard with a broom when he runs across her strawberry patch. Later, he listens to his family gossip about the widow and how she giggles at night with the hired man. From the boy's point of view, as a child he doesn't understand the implications of that, though the adults do and so does the author. The boy just concludes that the giggling has "some improved" the widow.

When the boar Samson comes to breed Pinky, at first Robert is happy because it means that Pinky can live. As long as she bears piglets, she can maintain her life on the farm because she is contributing to the farm economy. However, when the moment comes for Samson to mate with Pinky and Robert must watch it, he is confronted with the brutal aspects of sex that he must observe being played out on his beloved pet. At the same moment that Robert understands the need and reality of breeding, he hates the brutality of it. The reader is able to observe this from the boy's point of view.

The reader sees Robert as a youngster chasing frogs and cuddling up with his pig, but the author reaches into the boy's mind and reveals a maturation that goes beyond mere duty. The boy Robert observes his father closely so he knows that Papa is getting sick. Robert knows that Papa wishes for a better life when he observes to a neighbor that his Papa seems to be working and working in his mind all the time, wishing for something he can never reach. The owner of Samson the boar observes this and asks if Robert figured out all these things himself. Robert says yes. The neighbor observes that Robert is a "keen lad, for a Shaker boy."

Setting

Like most youngsters, Robert's world is circumscribed by the boundaries of his home, which includes the farm, the surrounding countryside and the school. This isolation is compounded by the family's relative poverty and the strictures of a religion that doesn't indulge in much pleasure, which would include traveling. Robert's daily views include the barn, the chicken coop, and the barnyard. Although he eats and sleeps inside, the reader doesn't get much of a view of the house, probably because from a boy's point of view, being outdoors is the most important thing. Thus the reader observes careful details in the building of Pinky's pen but never sees much detail in the dining room or boy's bedroom.



With Robert, the reader enjoys the beauties of the farmland and countryside of Vermont in times before the land becomes highly developed. This is first fully revealed in Chapter seven, when after chores, Robert and Pinky set out to explore and play outside. Lying in purple clover and watching the sun go down, Robert sucks on a clover shoot, surrounded by clover and paintbrush. He details a hawk hunting as a boy would do who observes closely. He longs to watch the wild hawk tear up a rabbit to feed her young. He loves to watch the sunset and arrives home just in time to view the last moments of sundown with his father, who is also enjoying the sight. His father agrees that the sky is a good place to look and adds that it will be a good place to go, linking the beautiful setting with his impending death.

Language and Meaning

Play with language is one of this book's most interesting and amusing aspects. Author Peck writes in the semi-literate style of country people, grammatical errors and all. This is done without quotation marks or any reference to the mistakes. In other words, the story is truly told from the boy Robert's point of view, including all the errors in speech.

This shows up immediately in the opening of the book when Robert says, "I should of been in school." The country errors in speech are not limited to the boy, however, since the whole family speaks in this way. "I never see the like of it," Mama says. Describing the method of cleaning out the wound, Papa says, "Let [the wound] open up and holler out all the dirt." Later, declining the gift of the piglet at first, Papa says, ". . . it's not the Shaker way to take frills for being neighborly. All that Robert done was what any farmer would do for another. It don't add up to payment or due."

When Papa is teaching Robert to use a capstan, Robert points out that using a single chain would be "too blundersome." When discussing breeding Pinky, Papa says, "We could a bred her to bar at the third." When describing Papa's constant labor, Robert comments, "He don't never rest." Whether the language is in dialog or explication, the errors persist, because they are young Robert Peck's voice.

At the same time, Robert is eloquent. He describes the powerful purple of the clover at sunset, the underside of the hawk "like a torch against the softer colors of his underbody." To him the reddening clouds look like when "Mama poured peach juice on the large curds of white potcheese." When the hawk dives, Robert notes that the wings appear to be "pegged to his sides." Although Robert can't seem to get an A in English, the reader knows that he has a gift for language as expressed by the adult author Peck. These disingenuous grammatical mistakes alongside the simply elegant prose make for an endearing read. The reader smiles at Robert while at the same time enjoying him and loving him for his straightforward yet poetic approach to his life.

The farm is an important metaphor as well as the primary setting of the book. Midway through the book, Papa comments that a man's method of farming reveals his character, and that good farming is a joy to behold. Papa is happy to have the land and looks forward to having it all paid off one day. Later, when Mr. Tanner brings Samson the



boar to breed Pinky, he reflects the same sentiments. He points out that there is no higher calling than tending the land and being a farmer. Despite all that, eventually Robert becomes an author and writes this book! He never leaves the land but he becomes something more than simply a farmer.

The book is a straightforward, poignant look at a people and way of life that are gone for now. Robert is maturing as any boy would do; in fact, the straightforward and sometimes brutal life on the farm has taught him more than many modern young people could possibly know. He knows about life and death from first-hand observation, so he is prepared for his father's death, though it grieves him dearly.

Structure

This book is straight narrative in an episodic form. Author Peck recalls with some fondness, humor and relish many of his boyhood experiences. The construction of the pigpen, for example, recalls now-past methods of making items by hand. The episodes are not put together with any particular format, although there is constant foreshadowing of Pinky's death and Papa's death to follow. Throughout the reader observes Robert doing work and undertaking challenges which will lead him from being a boy into a being a man.

One example of this is Robert's negotiation with Mr. Tanner when breeding Pinky. Tanner informs him that there will be a \$60 stud fee or the pick of two of the litter. Robert agrees to two of the litter and internally observes that the visit has changed from being social to being business. Tanner computes the financial gain that can come from having a good breeding pig such as Pinky, that within a few years, gain from her litter could actually pay off the farm. At first Robert worries that these financial speculations might be against the plain and simple Shaker way, but Tanner reminds him that after all, the farm is a primary good.

In this chapter, the author refers to Mr. Tanner as Ben, demonstrating that Robert is entering into manhood and manly negotiations. Later, when Pinky must be slaughtered to maintain the family, Robert is required to assist but also breaks down and cries, and Papa sheds tears as well, indicating that being a real man is never easy. Robert grieves fully at this point, but later, when after a winter that receives no detail at all in the book, Papa dies, Robert seems to grieve little. He has left that grief behind with his boyhood.



Quotes

"That's what being a man is all about, boy. It's just doing what's got to be done." (139)

"Somehow, the Good Lord don't want to see no man start a cold morning with just black coffee." (27)

"Thanks be praised all the history I need's in our Family Bible tucked away under the bed in the Bible Box. And in the Book of Shaker." (35)

"We are Plain People, your mother and aunt, and your sisters, you and me. We live the Book of Shaker. We are not worldly people, and we suffer the less for not paining with worldly wants and wishes." (37)

"We hear all the music that's in the wind, so much music that it itches my foot to start tapping. Just like a fiddle." (37)

"All he needs . . . is a tutor,' said Aunt Mattie . . . I sure knew what a 'tooter' was. Its real name was a cornet, and [Jacob] played it in the school band . . . So I was some relieved . . ." (54)

"Next time,' said Aunt Mattie, 'I'll teach the pig.'" (60)

"The whole sky was pink and peaches. Just looking up at it made you feel clean, even if you worked all day." (68)

"Never miss a chance,' Papa had once said, 'to keep your mouth shut.'" (91)

"But if'n there was a pervert in the place, they sure kept it hid. I sure hoped I'd see me one or two before we left Rutland . . ." (93)

"Dying is dirty business. Like getting born." (113)

"Need is a weak word. Has nothing to do with what people get. Ain't what you need that matters. It's what you do." (120)

"There they were, the three people who probably loved me more than anyone in the whole world . . . And all of them were good shouting Baptists. It just goes to show how wrong I could feel about some things. And how foolish." (132)

"That's what being a man is all about, boy. It's just doing what's got to be done." (139)

"Hear me, God,' I said. 'It's hell to be poor.'" (145)

Adaptations

A Day No Pigs Would Die tells of Peck's childhood experiences, and the author models the main character after himself.

Soup also treats Peck's early life in rural Vermont, and Rob narrates the story, but Soup Vinson, his best friend, becomes the focus of the action. Lighthearted and delightful, *Soup* is one of a ten-book series that Peck will undoubtedly continue.

Peck also serves as the main character in his book of poetry, *Bee Tree*, and in his half-prose, half-poetry volume, *My Vermont*. Three of Peck's books, *Soup and Me*, *Soup for President*, and *Mr. Little*, have been made into Afterschool and Weekend Specials for ABC-TV.



Topics for Discussion

1. "Weaseling" a dog was a common way to teach a dog to hate and kill weasels. What happens when Ira Long, Rob, and his papa weasel Ira's dog?

What lesson do they learn?

2. Rob demonstrates his sense of responsibility by his attitude toward his chores. Give examples from the story.

3. Who does Papa think is the better farmer, himself or Mr. Tanner? Why?

Who does Rob think is better?

4. Rob's trip to the Rutland Fair is a dream come true, and he feels a wide range of emotions. What are they? Have you had a similar experience?

5. The name of this book comes from the final chapter. What is its significance?

6. Rob's view of religion is limited to Shaker beliefs. How does he react when he discovers that Aunt Matty and Mr. and Mrs. Tanner are Baptists?

7. Papa and Rob use a capstan to help the ox move the corn crib. What is a capstan and how does it work?



Essay Topics

In many traditional societies such as the Shakers, children grow up very quickly and take their places in the adult world while yet in early adolescence. This is very different from modern American society. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each way of growing up.

In another popular juvenile novel about a pig facing slaughter, *Charlotte's Web*, the pig is saved by the intervention of a clever spider and does not die. However, in *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, the pig does lose its life. Which do you feel is the more powerful story and why?

In *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, everyday life is regulated by religious belief. Explore the advantages and disadvantages of living by a religious code.

The style of *A Day No Pigs Would Die* includes many intentional grammatical mistakes. Does this detract from or enhance the book in your opinion?

In *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, the reader quickly discovers clear delineation of gender roles. The men do outdoor and farm work while the women do housework. Young Robert at thirteen becomes the head of the household when his father dies, instead of his mother assuming the role. What are the advantages and disadvantages of such a system? Do you agree with it?

Because author Peck is telling the story of his boyhood, in some ways this book resembles autobiography, although the story is told in third person. How would the book have been different if it had been told in first person? Which rendering do you think you would prefer?

The Shakers characterized themselves as very simple people. They took care of their own needs as much as they could and spurned anything fanciful or what they called "frills." Robert grew up in a household that could be called poor by today's standards. Do you feel the Pecks were poor? Papa insists that the family is rich indeed. Why would this be so?

If you were to write the memoirs of your own life, as author Peck has done here, what would be some of the significant episodes you would include? Write a short paper on why each remembrance would figure in your own memoir.



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Haven Peck quotes the Book of Shaker and lives by Shaker Law. What are his basic beliefs? Does Rob agree with them? Why or why not?
2. Some critics believe *A Day No Pigs Would Die* contains too much unnecessary realism: animal mating, butchering, and weaseling. Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. Peck uses rural expressions, similes, and metaphors throughout his book. Cite examples. Does this technique improve his style? Why or why not?
4. Peck presents the imminence of death for both man and beast. How does he foreshadow the deaths of Haven Peck, the rabbit, and Pinky?
5. Although the reader never meets Rob's teacher, a clear picture of her is presented. How is it presented and what is she like?



Further Study

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Yardley's opinion is that the book expresses "sentiment without sentimentality."



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