

# **A Gathering of Days Study Guide**

**A Gathering of Days by Joan W. Blos**

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## Plot Summary

The novel "A Gathering of Days" by Joan W. Blos is the fictional diary of a fourteen-year-old girl who lived in Meredith, New Hampshire, during the early nineteenth century. These are the days before the Civil War when slaves still existed in the nation. Catherine begins to record the events of her humble life in October 1830. Catherine describes a pioneer lifestyle that was simple and joyful, yet devastating. At the end of the work, there is a letter from Catherine to her great-granddaughter in which she states how joyful it is to share the events of her diary.

Catherine begins her journal by stating that it has been brought for her from Boston by her father. She includes many forms of writing within her diary including recipes, various short stories told by her father or uncle, and various occurrences at her school, but her main focus is with her family. The reader is immediately introduced to her father, Charles Hall, and the fact that her mother died four years earlier after giving birth to a son who also passed away. She also has a younger sister named Matty and an unmarried uncle named Jack. Her best friend is Cassie Shipman who lives in a house south of Catherine's. Cassie has three brothers—David, Asa, and William.

Despite the loss of her mother and having to grow up at a young age in order to take care of the household, Catherine leads a happy life. One night, Charles Hall tells his daughters the story of a man who was walking in the woods one day and thought he saw a headless woman. He returned the next day to find it was just a tree. Shortly after the story, Catherine thinks she sees a phantom in the woods. Soon after, her lesson book goes missing and she cannot find it anywhere. After days of searching, she sees it on a rock near the school yard. She discovers writing inside the book—a plea for help from the cold. Asa, who knows about the stranger who wrote in her book, asks Catherine to meet him at the rock. When they meet, the two friends wonder whether or not it could be a runaway slave that left the message. A few days later, some pies are found missing from the Shipman's storage and Asa takes the blame. Catherine and he both know it was the stranger who took them, but neither is willing to put his life in jeopardy. Asa tells Cassie about the man.

Cassie grows angry with Catherine for not coming to her with the news and explains withholding information is the same as lying. The two friends soon resolve the dispute and decide to give one of Catherine's mother's quilts to the fugitive. They leave the quilt on the rock. As the winter worsens, they find that the blanket is gone and so are all traces of the man. Mrs. Shipman's unmarried sister arrives in town with hopes of winning over the heart of Catherine's father. Her name is Aunt Lucy. After a few encounters, Catherine's father makes it clear he does not want to marry her and she leaves him alone.

Teacher Holt brings in *The Liberator* by William Garrison into the school one day to teach. He believes in teaching his students all aspects of society, including the bad. Soon after, Teacher Holt is accused of helping the fugitive escape and bringing newspapers into the school. He confesses to the second crime and is no longer allowed



to bring in texts not approved by the town. He is also forced to move into the home of the Shipman's. However, he continues to teach *The Liberator* after school.

When Catherine's father goes on his annual trading trip to Boston, he comes back with news of his engagement to a woman named Ann Highman. At first, Catherine does not seem to react to the news, but as the day of the wedding approaches, she grows to dislike the woman. Ann arrives with her son Daniel and for a while things are awkward around the house. As time passes, they get used to each other and Catherine grows to accept her father's new bride. One day a new weaver is called to the house and amidst talk of stitching, Matty brings up the fact Catherine gave away one of the quilts to a stranger. As a punishment, Catherine is forced to make a replacement quilt. The children discover Aunt Lucy and Teacher Holt are to be married.

When the weather grows unusually warm, the Shipman's and Hall's pick berries together. During the excursion, Cassie grows very cold and suffers with a fever after. As the days pass, Cassie's health continues to deteriorate and she finally dies. This is a tough event for Catherine who considered Cassie to be her most dear friend. After her death, Catherine's life begins to change dramatically. She is taken out of school because the new teacher is too harsh and gets home schooling from her step-mother. Soon after the marriage of Teacher Holt and Aunt Lucy, Aunt Lucy invites Catherine to come to her new home in another town to help take care of the baby. Catherine agrees and at the end of the diary, she reflects on her last moments at home.



# Chapters I - II

## Summary

The story begins with a diary entry in which Catherine Cabot Hall introduces herself as a girl of thirteen years. The diary was given to her by her father, Charles Hall. Her mother dies four years earlier from a fever. Catherine has a younger sister named Mary Martha who looks like her mother, but doesn't have blue eyes like Catherine. We are also introduced to her best friend Cassie Shipman, who has three brothers and whose house is close, but much larger. One night, Catherine's father tells them a story of a man who walked in the woods and thought he saw a headless woman. He ran home, but the next morning he returned to see it was just a tree. Her father commends the man for showing true intelligence and not remaining fearful of the unknown. While walking home from school, Catherine thinks she sees a lanky man, but he disappears as soon as she tells Cassie to look. A few days later, Mrs. Shipman, Cassie's mother calls to tell Catherine's father that her sister, "the unmarried one", will be coming to town. He tells her he doesn't want to hurt her feelings, but they are doing fine.

In chapter two, Catherine sees the phantom once again and vows to go check one day. One of the girls in her school, Sophy, is being sent to Lowell, Massachusetts to work in the mills. Another classmate, Joshua Nelson, was beaten in school by Teacher Holt for blaming another student for what he did. Afterwards, he had to write "to thine own self be true", a concept with which Catherine agrees. During the weekend, Mrs. Shipman's sister, Aunt Lucy, arrives and on Thanksgiving Day the two families have a wonderful dinner together. During the dinner, Catherine's father was not as quiet as usual.

## Analysis

Blos introduces audiences to Catherine by using the epistolary form. The novel begins when Catherine begins her diary. This introduction works as a beginning of the story that will soon play out. By using this form, Blos is able to examine many different aspects of Catherine's life-- from the mundane to the extraordinary. The story that Catherine's father tells her about the man in the woods foreshadows the figure Catherine later sees on her way home from school. The reader is also able to discern Catherine will not settle for believing in the phantom, but will go examine the area as the man in the story did. This assumption can be made because of the strong belief Catherine places on her father's words.

From these two chapters, the reader is also introduced to everyday life during November of 1830 in New England. It was a time when young girls were sent to work when there was not enough money. It is possible to discern school was still a privilege and those who were extremely poor could not afford it when times got rough. Catherine understands it is necessary for Sophy to work, depicting the normalcy of the situation. When Catherine's other classmate is thrashed by the teacher, the audience is made



aware corporal punishment was still a reality in schools. In the case of the beating, Catherine seems to sympathize with the teacher's perspective and believes one should not blame others, but be true to themselves.

## Vocabulary

spectral, vagrant, trough, apparition, girth, prudent, demurred, ruefully, petulant, capacious



# Chapters III - IV

## Summary

Catherine loses her lessons book on the day her teacher suggests she show it to her father. She cannot find it anywhere and is upset she broke her teacher's trusting she would keep it safe. The next day, Aunt Lucy comes to visit the house and asks Catherine's father to fix a strap from her trunk. Her father fixes it without talking to her and Catherine busies herself with stitching her father's pants. Aunt Lucy remarks she should have brought her own stitching and finally leaves. Matty, Catherine's older sister, comments Sophy had stated Matty's father should marry Aunt Lucy. Her father comments they should look elsewhere. A few days later, Catherine sees her lesson book outside the school with the words "PLEEZ MISS TAKE PITY I AM COLD" inscribed inside. Asa, Cassie's brother tells her to meet him and they discuss who it could be. Asa had found the lesson book first and thinks it is a runaway slave.

Catherine and Asa decide to help the fugitive. At the Shipman's house, some pies are found missing and Asa takes the blame. Asa talks to Cassie about the man and Cassie grows angry with Catherine for not telling her. In school the lesson is to "Give to them that want" and Catherine tries to plea to Cassie saying they are doing a good thing. Cassie considers it a lie and Catherine comes to see her point that by concealing the truth, she has betrayed Cassie. Eventually, they forgive each other and go to the rock to leave a quilt for the fugitive. Catherine is overwhelmed by thoughts of him.

## Analysis

Chapter three begins more of a consistent plot line in which the main character is consumed by a particular event and begins to comment on it. The reader can better understand the plot of the story and the characters begin to come together. The stranger that has come into Catherine's life has disturbed the peace and quiet. Due to this, she can no longer concentrate on the ordinary events, but devotes most of her attention to the fugitive. Asa also becomes a central point to the story because he is in league with Catherine. He helps her keep the fugitive safe. Even though he could easily blame the stranger for taking the pies, he does not want to jeopardize the unknown man's situation. This act depicts the goodness of Asa's character.

Catherine is not used to keeping things from others, especially from her father and Cassie. When Cassie finds out Catherine has been hiding things from her, she becomes extremely upset. The stranger has unknowingly caused a bridge in their relationship and further disturbs the normalcy of Catherine's life. In chapter four, Blos questions the nature of lying and suggests concealment of the truth can be considered lying. The reader also gains insight into the deep love the two girls share. They are not easily swayed away from the friendship and both ask for forgiveness.



## Vocabulary

inclement, transpired, foolscap, disported, tarried, rebuke, indenture, chastised, adamant, wan





# Chapters V - VI

## Summary

While Catherine watches some boys figure skate, she notices some go to the edge where the ice is thin just to get a drink of water. She thinks it is foolishness and tells her father who leaves her a letter saying it is easy to see imperfections in others, but it takes a lot more to see imperfections in ourselves. Catherine celebrates Christmas day by going to church and then coming home to eat a warm dinner. She is thankful for the warmth and remembers baby Jesus. Soon after, Asa discovers the blanket they set out is gone and so are all marks of the fugitive. Asa states whoever the fugitive was, he is now gone after which Catherine feels a sense of relief. The winter chill gets colder and the snow covers most of the house. Catherine's father comments her mother usually got what she wanted even though she was a small woman. Catherine imagines what the days must have been like before she and Matty were born-- her father and mother happily together.

On the way home from school, Asa complains about arithmetic. The girls don't have to take a math so advanced. During an assignment at school, Catherine thinks about the fugitive and wonders where his travels may have led him. As the winter continues, the families find themselves confined to the house until one day when the entire town gathers to shovel the ice from the roads. That night, Teacher Holt comes over because it is too dark to return to his home.

## Analysis

Christmas is an important time for Catherine and helps calm the worry that came with thoughts of the fugitive. In these chapters, life returns to a peaceful state even though the cold continues to increase. The thoughts about her mother depict Catherine's loss is still present in her thoughts and in the thoughts of her father. Her father is not ready to remarry because he is still in love with his former wife. Blos uses the changes in weather to depict Catherine's shifts in moods. When the weather was changing, so was her life with the introduction of the fugitive, but when winter is well underway, her life begins to settle once again just as she becomes used to the snow. This technique helps mesh the external occurrences of Catherine's life and her internal thoughts.

The gender differences are made clear in this chapter with the implication women are unable to learn higher forms of mathematics. In contrast, we also see the kindness of the New England people. The community is small and the families are all close. They gather together to shovel the roads and accept guests freely into their homes. It may be through this open giving that Catherine gained the kindness to give to a complete stranger she may never meet.

## Vocabulary

deftly, discernment, disported, availed, implements, regaled, lamented, cyphering, sougning, deployed, hove, smirch, chagrinned, gleaned, amply



# Chapters VII - VIII

## Summary

Catherine is overwhelmed when she learns the population of New Hampshire through a newspaper. There are 117 blind people, a fact that makes Catherine and Cassie wonder what it would be like to be blind and walk home with their eyes closed, holding tightly to each other. They realize one has the choice of how much they let their blindness get them down. They also realize there are 623 free slaves and wonder what it would be like to be a slave, but cannot. She grows sick and thinks of the little boy that was her brother who died soon after his birth along with her mother. When she returns to school, Teacher Holt brings a paper called *The Liberator* that deals with the “slavery question”. People of the town question his teaching style and state he may have been the one to help the runaway. One day he brings in the paper with an ad selling a young girl, seventeen years of age. Catherine thinks about the fact the girl being sold is not much older than many of her classmates. At the end of chapter seven, Teacher Holt turns in a letter at the District Meeting stating he did not help any fugitive escape, but he did show his students newspaper clippings in order to promote the knowledge of freedom and liberty.

Teacher Holt has to find a new place to live and does so with the Shipman’s who demand payment. While at church, Catherine’s father comments he will no longer make the candle stand for the chair, but a matching chair instead. He jokes that any chair would want that, just like a human being. Teacher Holt will only teach texts approved by the town from now on. Catherine considers being a teacher for the summer months, the only time when women are allowed. One day, after school, she finds Teacher Holt is teaching *The Liberator* to all those who are interested. Spring comes and Catherine turns fourteen.

## Analysis

Mingled with Catherine’s child-play, Blos reveals many harsh realities of the period in history. Slaves were commonplace, something even the youngest children had heard of. The audience is able to gain an insight into the plight of the slaves into the Northern states. The news reveals there are many more slaves than Catherine imagined, even though the number seems small to modern audiences. By placing the story in this context and depicting it through Catherine’s eyes, the audience is able to connect how the number came as a shock to someone who lived during the early 1800s. Teacher Holt is obviously sympathetic to the plight of the slaves and makes a point to teach his students freedom is for everyone. By bringing in *The Liberator* to the world of a little girl, modern audiences are able to see how the paper would have been received during the time and how it could have impacted mere school children while putting the reputation of Teacher Holt in jeopardy.



The townspeople are not as sympathetic as Teacher Holt about the plight of the slaves and deny him from teaching it in school. In this chapter, Teacher Holt is treated like an outsider. Catherine's father makes a rude jest suggesting human beings should prefer the company of others who are like them. With this comment, the audience is made aware he is against the black man and though he opposes slavery, he cannot bear the thought of interacting with a black man. Teacher Holt maintains his teachings after school because he believes in the cause and knows keeping the truth from the school children will make them less sympathetic to the black man as they grow older.

## Vocabulary

abating, swaddled, interposed, deprive, harrow, infringed, desist, incurred, conspirator, scruples, acquired, delegation, exhortation, abides



# Chapters IX - X

## Summary

All members of the town gather to help collect sap from the trees and hardly anyone attends school. When the sap turns to syrup, the entire town is excited. Still, it seems there will be an early end to the syrup and Catherine's father compares the turning of the sap to a child turning into a man. It takes time and patience. Joshua Nelson's mother has a cow's horn go through her cheek. Joshua is Catherine's classmate who always seems to have trouble. One day, a strange man comes to town asking for Mr. Jeremy Preston. Catherine finds out the gentleman used to work for Mr. Preston as a boy and one night after being beaten for spending time with girls, the boy left with Mr. Preston's money. He had many adventures and after saving his shipmates from pirates, was presented to the Czar of Russia as a hero. He had come back to give Mr. Preston back his money with interest. The town was abuzz with the story. Teacher Holt and Aunt Lucy are seen kissing by Joshua. Catherine and her sister pull a prank on her father by replacing his candle with a turnip.

On the last day of school, the children exchange love notes and gifts. Asa comes to Catherine for help on the poem he is writing to Sophy. When the day arrives, Catherine gets forget-me-nots from Joshua Nelson and Sophy is thrilled with the poem. Asa and Catherine decide to take the path of the woods on the way home and Catherine thinks about the fugitive (or villain) and whether she did a charity or a folly. Catherine's father prepares to go to Boston for his annual trading trip. He takes longer than a week to come back, but when he does, he has news that he is engaged to a widow named Ann Highman. She sends Catherine a blue bonnet to match her eyes.

## Analysis

In the early nineteenth century, school tended to take a backseat to other things. In chapter nine, the children leave school to help collect the syrup from the trees. This activity was deemed more important than schooling because it eased an immediate need. Knowledge was considered important, but not as important as providing for the home and the community. We were given an example of this early in the novel and Blossie carries it on in this chapter. It has been many months now since Catherine helped the fugitive and now as she looks back she is led to wonder whether she did the right thing. The more one distances oneself from a situation, the hazier the decisions seem. At the time, he did not seem like a villain to her, but in this chapter she wonders if he may have been because of the distance that time has created.

The exchange of love notes and gifts foreshadow the news Catherine's father brings at the end of the chapter. The exchange also depicts the passing of time and how Catherine is growing into a young woman. Yet, she is still too young to take the love notes too seriously. Her youth is again seen when she pulls a prank on her father.



These scenes add humor to the novel and make Catherine's character more believable. It is surprising Catherine does not comment much about her father's announcement of his engagement.

## Vocabulary

contrivance, frigate, refractory, accumulation, consternation, resplendent, abcedarians, dappled, beholden



# Chapters XI - XII

## Summary

A Jewish peddler comes by the house and Catherine greets him with surprise-- she has never seen a Jew. She asks him why he sells some scissors for a higher price than others. He laughs and comments he used to sell them all for the same price, but the public wouldn't buy them because they did not trust the quality. When he began to sell some at a higher price, they began to buy. Catherine's father grows excited as the wedding approached and Catherine begins to comment on the negative aspects about the woman. She thinks Ms. Highman, who asks Catherine in her letters if everything she needs is in the house, is too bold. But everyone seems to sympathize with the new woman. When the day of the wedding arrives, Catherine vows she will not call her Mother. Soon after, her father arrives with the new woman and her son. They are plainer than everyone expected.

Catherine and her sister take out the old bedding to air in the sun. The new wife comments she wants to remember the moment when she had doubts. Catherine finds it a strange thing for her to say. When Uncle Jack comes over, he is chastised by the new wife for making jokes in front of the children. He leaves soon after and Catherine's father is angry. As the days pass, the new wife rearranges all the furniture to make it more like Boston. The Shipmans get a new wall mural and the stencil man tells Catherine how he did it. Soon after, Catherine starts summer school with the new teacher Ms. Orpha Williams. A new weaver comes in to make a quilt for the new wife. With the talk of linen and quilts, Matty reveals Catherine's secret of giving away one of her mother's quilts. Catherine then confesses the whole story to the new wife who calls her a child and asks if she thought of the danger. Catherine's father and his new wife decide Catherine will have to make a new quilt to replace it. She cries as she hasn't done in years.

## Analysis

Once again the audience is reminded of how closed off the community is. Catherine has never seen a Jew in her life, depicting how little diversity there is in her town. A common stereotype Jews face is that they are cunning and use this ability to make money. Blos plays on the stereotype of Jews, but adds ironically it was the public that instilled the idea to give the same scissors two prices. The man did not think this way at first. The fact that Catherine is able to see past the prices and ask about them, depicts her maturity. She is able to see what many adults can't. In the same way, later in the story, she is able to see clearly helping another human being was worth sacrificing an old quilt. On the other hand, her step-mother chastises her for it.

Her stepmother is more concerned about the loss of the quilt than about the warmth of the fugitive. In acting selfishly, the stepmother displays an immature way of thinking



while Catherine is modeled as the true hero. She selflessly gave a quilt her mother had made. Her mother was very special to her and the quilt probably meant more to her than it could have ever meant to the stepmother. Yet, Catherine was willing to make the sacrifice. This maturity stands in stark contrast to the thinking of the adults in the story.

## Vocabulary

tawdry, candor, indisposed, enjoins, avails, compressing, plummet, implement





## Chapters XIII - XIV

### Summary

Catherine begins sewing the quilt with instructions from her stepmother. She interjects with a story from Uncle Jack and news that Joshua, who used to be indifferent to studies, aspires to go study at Mr. Dudley Leavitt's school in Meredith. When Catherine comments on her lack of progress with the quilt, the new wife states she is learning a lesson for giving away the quilt. The family celebrates the Fourth of July and Catherine thinks the day is marvelous. When her sister Matty gets a bee sting, Catherine is upset she chooses to go to her (the stepmother) rather than to her sister. Later, Daniel comes up with the name Mammann for Catherine and Matty to call the new wife. Afterward, they grow closer and Catherine begins confiding in her more. The family discovers a young boy died while setting off the fireworks in the Fourth of July celebration. The new wife states it is not a price worth paying. Catherine discovers Cassie likes Daniel.

Teacher Holt and Aunt Lucy are to be married. Sophy exclaims in all the merriment, Cassie and Catherine should try not to forget her. Overwhelmed by her sudden emotion, they agree. Catherine's father tells a story about a poor woman he heard of as a boy. She asked for butter from a woman who said she didn't have any. The poor woman ran away shrieking as the good wife heated up some butter. A few days later, the poor woman was found dead with a burn. The days grow very hot and one day, while picking berries, Cassie got a chill and fell into a fever for many days. Though she seemed to be getting better, she died at the end of the chapter.

### Analysis

Catherine seems to have a hard time adjusting to the ways of her step-mother. Catherine finds her cruel for forcing her to make the quilt. She never addresses the woman by her name and depicts her dislike of the woman by calling her "her" when Matty confides in her. At the end of chapter thirteen, they seem to come to terms with their differences after Daniel finds a name for Catherine to call her. When she says Mammann, she is better able to connect with the new woman and sees her as a person rather than a new object that has come to disrupt her life.

In the next chapter, Catherine refers to various tips and comments Mammann said in the same way she talked about her father in the beginning of the novel. Chapter fourteen is more emotionally trying than any other so far. It begins with an outburst of emotion as Sophy exclaims the two girls should not forget her and Catherine's father's story adds to the emotional nature. His story also foreshadows the coming of Cassie's death, setting up the dark mood.

## Vocabulary

vexation, contrived stricture, diversions, chaises, militia, fife, espied, declaiming, militia, lauded, maiming, solicitations, somnolent, intone, imprudent, repose



# Chapters XV - XVI

## Summary

A funeral is held for Cassie and Catherine is chosen to be one of the twelve girls in the funeral. They are dressed in white carrying bouquets of wildflowers. Even the men shed tears. After the funeral, Mammann comments she does not understand how the family can be so resigned and accepting of the death. Catherine wonders how it is Cassie was alive just a week before. Mrs. Shipman tells Catherine on the morning that Cassie died, her face was completely peaceful. In the two chapters, Catherine tries to come to peace with Cassie's death. Cassie's older brother comes to visit while Catherine is drawing and adds a mouse on top of her drawings. One Sunday, Catherine's father tells the story of the Wiley Slide tragedy that happened five years earlier. There was an avalanche brewing and when the family tried to run, they were caught by it while their house sat undamaged. After the story, Daniel bursts into tears and Catherine is reminded how much Daniel cared for Cassie as well.

Catherine still hasn't finished working on the quilt and David asks her the name of it at which she replies it is the "Mariner's Compass". Asa asks how that could be with the quilt in Boston and the sailor out at sea without the compass. All three burst out laughing for the first time after Cassie's death. Soon after, they learn news of the slave rebellion led by Nat Turner and that Turner had been caught. There had been many killings and Cassie wonders how the town that cried so much over Cassie's death does not shed a tear for the many that have died in the rebellion. There is talk of the Negro separate nation and Catherine's father agrees with the idea while Uncle Jack protests, stating the slave owners know what is best for their slaves.

## Analysis

Catherine slowly comes to terms with Cassie's death as time passes. The chapter is much calmer than the rest and though it deals with everyday events as well, the situations Catherine notes have less humor and more tragedy. Mammann, who has not yet encountered much death, wonders how the family could take Cassie's death without anger. Catherine's father understands there is much more death in the country, but says nothing to counter. Yet, when he tells the story of the tragedy at Wiley Slide, it is to remind the family life can be taken at any time without much warning.

Catherine makes a good point when she realizes even though many cried for Cassie, no one cries for the lives lost in the rebellion. She takes all life as meaningful, a point that can be noted from the beginning of the novel when she helped the fugitive, until the deaths during the rebellion. Death, which has recently become a harsh reality, means more than it ever has and she is fully able to understand the implications. The reader is also made aware of the prejudices that existed in the north through Uncle Jack. He is



ignorant of the fact the slaves are people as well and have thoughts and feelings of their own.

## Vocabulary

sprigged, variant, ominous, imperiled, frailty, tansy, stints, dimity, censure, unabated, fervently, gossamer, undulated, contention, relinquishment



# Chapters XVII - XVIII

## Summary

Sophy leaves for Lowell to work in the mills and pins Asa's braid to her dress. The wedding of Teacher Holt and Aunt Lucy finally takes place and all present were there at Cassie's funeral. Many are dressed in black and some cast a face at Aunt Lucy's white bridal dress. A few days later, a package comes for Catherine in the same hand that wrote in her notebook so many months ago. The writing inside reads: "SISTERS BLESS YOU. FREE NOW. CURTIS. IN CANADA" and there are also two pieces of crocheted lace, one for Catherine and one for Cassie. When winter school starts, Mammann gives Catherine a shawl and they catch each other's eyes for a moment. Sophy's family intends to move to Ohio in the early spring where there is more hope. The stencillers who painted a mural in the Shipman house come around and ask Catherine's father if he would like photographs taken of his children and wife. He agrees, but Catherine is not pleased with the portrait. Uncle Jack longs to go west as well, toward Ohio or farther. In schools, there are new rules and all the older boys break them as much as possible. One night, Catherine's father gives Daniel his knife-- one that Catherine longed for as a little girl. At school, Joshua stood up before he was supposed to and when he was called up, a giggle burst forth from someone else. The teacher told Joshua to take his shirt off and just as he was going to lash his back, David and Asa grabbed the teacher while Daniel opened the door. The boys threw the teacher out into the yard.

Daniel tells their father about the incident at school. Catherine and Matty are taken out of school so they don't have to be subjected to the new teacher's silly rules. They are taught lessons at home by Mammann. Aunt Lucy is to have a baby in the spring and she asks Catherine to come live with her when the baby is born because they need the help. At the end of the chapter, Catherine reminisces about old times and thinks of Cassie. When she looks at the mural at the Shipman's Cassie showed her, she thinks of how it will always be spring for Cassie. The diary ends with an entry in which Catherine sits ready to leave for Aunt Lucy's. At the end of the novel, there is a letter from Catherine to her great-granddaughter speaking of the future and how it affected Joshua, Matty, Mammann and her father.

## Analysis

These final chapters deal with the transitions of life. Life begins to move along again as people try to live through the tragedy that has just befallen them. Sophy leaves to a new life at the mills where she must learn to become a woman without the aid of her family just before Catherine gets the announcement to leave her own home. Before this point, Catherine faces changes in her own community as she is taken out of the school she has attended for most of her life. Aunt Lucy begins her new life with Teacher Holt and will soon have a baby. Even the teacher at the school is different. The various



transitions affecting all members of the community depict the ever-changing nature of the world.

Catherine is aware of the continuous change that occurs throughout one's life as she reminisces about Cassie's death. In contrast to life, Catherine believes in death there is no change. These transitions are summed up in the final letter that Catherine sends to her granddaughter in which she highlights all the major life paths of the people who were close to her in her younger years.

## Vocabulary

nubbin, hankering, loquacious, flouting, bantam, haranguing, contrite, catechism, blaspheme, flibbertigibbet, woeful, bereaved



# Characters

## Catherine Cabot Hall

Catherine Cabot Hall is the main character in *A Gathering of Days*. The novel is written through her eyes. She is thirteen at the beginning of the work and turns fourteen sometime after. She has a younger sister, Matty. They live with their Father. Her mother died four years before she began her diary and Catherine has her blue eyes. She is incredibly gentle, kind, and understanding, and this is demonstrated in her sensitivity to those who are disadvantaged.

## Charles Hall

Charles Hall is the father of Catherine Hall. She refers to him simply as “Father” throughout the work. He is a storyteller and uses his stories to relay morals to his daughters. Catherine holds great respect for him. At the beginning of the novel, he is still overcome by the loss of his wife, but learns to move on as the work progresses.

## Matty Hall

Matty Hall is the younger sister of Catherine Hall. Matty has dark, curling hair and turns eight through the span of the novel. She adds a childlike innocence to the work, seeing many things for the first time, and coming to understand them through the influence of those she loves, such as Catherine.

## Cassie Shipman

Fifteen year-old Cassie Shipman is Catherine's best friend. They go to school together and spend all of their free time together. Cassie believes in doing the right thing and at one point, the two friends come to a disagreement on this point. They soon forget their differences. Near the end of the work, Cassie dies of a fever.

## Asa Hale Shipman

Asa Hale Shipman is Cassie's fourteen year-old younger brother. Friends with Cassie, they discover the fugitive and work together to help him. Asa is fun-loving and carefree-- a typical country boy. He has a crush on Sophy and gives her a poem on the last day of school.



## **Sophy**

Sophy is a classmate of Catherine and Cassie who is to be sent off to Lowell to work at the age of fifteen. She likes Asa and carries his lock of hair to Lowell with her when she leaves.

## **Ann Highman (Mammann)**

Ann Highman, or Mammann, is Catherine's stepmother. Charles meets her in Boston when he goes there for his usual trading. At first, she is awkward and doesn't fit in with the country lifestyle, but grows to adjust. She is critical of Catherine and her sister, but slowly learns to gain their trust and love.

## **Daniel Highman**

Daniel Highman is Ann Highman's son. He is the same age as Catherine and they attend school together. He and Asa become fast friends. Right before Cassie dies, he begins to like her and is deeply hurt by her passing.

## **Mr. and Mrs. Shipman**

Mr. and Mrs. Shipman are the parents of Cassie Shipman who live in the lot to the south of the Halls. They are friendly neighbors who take in Teacher Holt and are present at every major gathering. They are very close to the Hall family.

## **Uncle Jack**

Uncle Jack is Catherine's vivacious uncle who comes over to tell stories. He is very opinionated, but adds good cheer to any gathering.

## **Aunt Lucy**

Aunt Lucy is Mrs. Shipman's sister who is initially introduced as “the unmarried one”. She arrives in the town hoping to marry Catherine's father, but when she learns he has no intention of marrying her, she stops pursuing the matter. She later marries Teacher Holt and calls Catherine to live at her home in order to take care of her baby.

## **Teacher Holt**

Teacher Holt is the school teacher for the town. He fights for the rights of all people, including Negroes. He believes in educating children with all sorts of resources including the media. The townspeople are enraged when they hear Teacher Holt has





been bringing *The Liberator* into the classroom. He moved into the Shipman's home due to the scandal. It is concluded only texts approved by the townspeople will be taught, yet Teacher Holt manages to teach *The Liberator* after school. He later marries Aunt Lucy.

## **Curtis**

Curtis is the unknown shadow the reader meets in the beginning of the work. Throughout the work, his identity is left a mystery until the very end when he sends Catherine a parcel with his name stating he is now free. Catherine had guessed he was a fugitive slave, but with the note her guess is confirmed.

## **David Shipman**

David Shipman is Cassie's older brother by a year. After her death, he comes over and draws a mouse on top of Catherine's sketches. He spends his time with Daniel, Asa, and Joshua.

## **Joshua Nelson**

Joshua Nelson is Catherine's classmate who seems to always get in trouble. We are first introduced to him when he receives a thrashing from Teacher Holt. As the story progresses, he becomes more studious. He gives Catherine forget-me-nots on the last day of school. At the end of the novel, we learn he went to war and sustained an injury that never properly healed.



# Objects/Places

## The School

The school is where many of the events involving Catherine's peers take place. This atmosphere depicts how education was treated in the early nineteenth century and gives a full perspective of Catherine's life.

## The Rock

The rock is where Catherine finds her lesson book with a note from Asa telling her to meet him there. It is on this same rock that Catherine leaves a blanket for the fugitive for which she later gets reprimanded.

## The Woods

The woods are where Catherine first encounters the fugitive she initially sees as a black phantom. After the fugitive disappears, Catherine cannot walk through the woods without thinking about him and how he may have fared.

## Quilt

The quilt is the blanket Cassie and Catherine leave on the rock for the stranger in reply to his plea. They wrap sausages and apples inside it. Later, the missing quilt is discovered by Catherine's stepmother and she is told to make another as punishment.

## Boston, Massachusetts

Boston, Massachusetts is where Catherine's father goes to trade goods. On one of his trips, he meets Ann Highman in Boston and marries her.

## New Hampshire

New Hampshire is the state where Catherine lives. The audience learns this through the newspaper Teacher Holt brings into town and Catherine comments on the population.

## Meredith

Meredith is the name of the town in which Catherine grows up. The young man who comes back to pay Mr. Preston, Count of Meredith, gains his name from the name of the town.

## Lowell, Massachusetts

Lowell, Massachusetts is the town that Sophy is sent to at the age of fifteen to work in the mills. Near the end of the novel, Catherine imagines going there to work one day.



# Themes

## Understanding

Throughout the novel, Catherine gains insight into the various aspects of life. She has a stable basis for understanding the ways of life through her father's storytelling which give her perspective on a broad number of situations. From a young age, Catherine was forced to grow up and take care of the household. On top of this load, she was also faced with her mother's death and the death of her infant brother. Later, she is faced with the sudden death of her best friend. Catherine quickly has to come to an understanding of death and how easily life can be taken away. She also comes to understand the difficulties inherent in life, such as when she is horrified to learn about so many blind people living in New Hampshire, or slavery.

As she grows older, she is faced with the prospect of her father's new marriage. At first, she is resistant to the change and doesn't like her new step-mother. As time goes on, she begins to understand that Mammann is not a bad person and truly cares about her and Matty. When she gains this understanding, Catherine is able to accept Mammann as an integral part of the family.

## Ethics

Ethics includes the understanding of things as either right or wrong, or somewhere in between - and how to respond to them. Blos makes the distinction that right and wrong are very subjective. This theme carries through from the very beginning of the work when Cassie grows angry with Catherine for not telling her about the fugitive. Cassie considers it lying and therefore does not accept it whereas Catherine doesn't consider withholding information to be lying. This is a clear example that what is right for some people may be wrong for others. Yet, Catherine is able to come to understand Cassie's point and vice versa. Even though right and wrong can be very subjective at times, Blos makes it clear with communication, disagreements on the matter can be easily resolved.

In the same way, Catherine considers helping the fugitive to be the right thing to do while her father and stepmother disagree completely. Catherine reasons her decision, but her father thinks about the situation in terms of her safety alone rather than the safety of the stranger. Even though Catherine cares a lot about what her father thinks, she follows her instinct to help the man. His plea for help touches her heart and she is unable to walk away from the situation without doing something. Teacher Holt does the same when he continues to teach *The Liberator* even though the townspeople declare that it is wrong.



## Discipline and Instruction

Catherine's father and step-mother provide moral guidance for both Catherine and her sister Matty. Charles Hall provides discipline and instruction by the means of his stories. In the first story he tells about the man who thinks he sees a headless woman, Catherine learns one should never fear something without knowing what it is. As in the case of the man in the story, it could turn out to be nothing and one would have feared for naught. This instruction leaves a lasting impact on Catherine and pushes her to make sure whether or not she saw a ghost.

Later in the story, Catherine's step-mother provides discipline by punishing Catherine for doing something she considers to be wrong. This discipline depicts that Mammann sees the importance of steady moral instruction.

# Style

## Point of View

A Gathering of Days is told from a first person, limited point of view. In this way, the audience is attuned to the main character's thoughts and ideas. Catherine comments on the many events that include the neighbors, her family, classmates and friends, providing a broad span of insight into life in Meredith. The limited point of view creates a narrow channel through which we are able to view New Hampshire in the early nineteenth century, enabling us to imagine what it would be like to feel and think like a fourteen-year-old girl in that era.

## Setting

A Gathering of Days is set in a Meredith, New Hampshire from the year 1830-1831. This time period provides insight into a unique time of United States History. Blos does a good job in making the world believable. She helps us see the whole town through the eyes of Catherine and gives a good overview of what everyday life was like. She also includes various important historical events to give a sense of what life was like on a broader scale.

## Language and Meaning

Blos writes in simple prose that can be easily understood by young and old. Though Blos does not use many words to tell her story, she incorporates a great deal into a small amount. Her use of naming historical events and places adds meaning the work and help give it historical importance.

## Structure

A Gathering of Days is divided by chapters and within those chapters it is further divided by dates. The work takes on the structure of a typical journal. The entire work follows Catherine's thoughts of her humble life, giving readers and intimate view into the mind of the young woman and helping to clearly demonstrate her development. The structure is easy to follow for the reader as well.



## Quotes

Father believes, as he's often said, that man's intelligence is given to him that he may distinguish right from wrong, and knowing right, may do so. Some think him too severe in this. It is not that, it is honor. (I paragraph 11)

Whoever he is, he's cold and needs us to help him, Cath. Who are we to judge? (III paragraph 24)

It requires but little discernment to discover the imperfections of others; but much humility to acknowledge our own. (V paragraph 31)

Skin soon cools," he said with a shrug, "and I had rather accept a beating than, by my denial, risk another's life. (V paragraph 33)

Silence followed the story's end – the part when they are poor again, she having wished too high. In secret did I remember, then, that I myself had oft longed for wealth without the dint of labour. I am glad to have been set right by Father's gentle instruction, the which I perceived in the tale. (XIV paragraph 110)

Strange, that one speaks of these deaths and slayings and is not disposed to tears. Yet each of those who perished there was to some other one dear. (XVI paragraph 119)

How I used to struggle with Matty, and on this account. Discipline of will, not relinquishment, is the lesson's desired end. How hard this is for each to learn, and how necessary. (XVI paragraph 123)

...men have two ears but one tongue; therefore ought they hear twice as much as they intend to speak. (XVII paragraph 129)

I do now believe we all are joined, where ever we are, whatever we do-- and be we quick, or be we dead; fair, dark, dear, or stranger. (XVIII paragraph 136)

Thus it now appears to me that trust, and not submission, defines obedience. (XVIII paragraph 139)



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

What does Blossie define as lying?

## Topic 2

Describe the way Blossie depicts nature and the various seasons that pass during the year that is chronicled. How does the weather impact the everyday events of the town?

## Topic 3

How does Catherine deal with the death of her mother?

## Topic 4

How do the feelings that Catherine has for her step-mother change over time?

## Topic 5

Why do the townspeople dislike Teacher Holt teaching *The Liberator* in the school? Why does Teacher Holt continue to teach the paper after school?