

# **The House of Dies Drear Study Guide**

## **The House of Dies Drear by Virginia Hamilton**

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# Plot Summary

The House of Dies Drear is a novel by award winning author Virginia Hamilton. Thomas Small is saddened to leave his hometown for the new house in Ohio, but he is excited about the history that surrounds the new house. The house Thomas and his family are to live in was once an important stop on the infamous Underground Railroad before the Civil War. However, the house is rumored to be haunted, a fact that seems to be illustrated the first night the family sleeps there and wakes to find odd triangles wedged into the door frames of the bedrooms. Now Thomas has a mystery to solve and only a short period of time in which to do it. The House of Dies Drear is a haunted house story that is not only filled with suspense, but with a history that will keep the reader fascinated long after the final sentence.

Thomas Small and his family are leaving their home in North Carolina to live in a new house in Ohio. Thomas' father, Mr. Small, is a history professor who has always been fascinated by the Underground Railroad that smuggled slaves to the North and Canada before the Civil War. The house the Small family is to live in in Ohio was once an important stop on the Underground Railroad. Thomas is just as excited as his father to explore the many hidden tunnels that are suspected to run under and through the house.

Thomas and his family arrive at the house of Dies Drear and discover it to be somewhat frightening in the way it sits nestled against an imposing cliff. Thomas immediately begins to explore the house and discovers a tunnel that opens with a push of a button under the front porch steps. Thomas explores the tunnel, but becomes frightened when he loses his light and begins to hear a strange breathing sound in the dark. Thomas screams for help and is shocked when a wall suddenly opens, exposing the kitchen of his new home and his family settling down to dinner. Thomas' father removes the mechanism that allows the porch steps to open and the kitchen wall to slide so that Thomas cannot explore the tunnels without an escort.

The first night in the new house Thomas vows to remain awake so that he might see the ghosts of Dies Drear and two slaves that are rumored to haunt the house. Thomas settles in the parlor, but quickly falls into a deep sleep, waking late in the morning with only a short time to prepare for church. As Thomas dresses, he becomes aware of some mystery that has grabbed his father's attention. Someone or something came into the house in the middle of the night and left three triangles wedged into the frames of the three bedrooms where the Small family slept. Thomas' father studies the triangles and discovers that together they form a Greek Cross. Thomas' father believes these crosses are some kind of warning to the family to leave the house of Dies Drear.

The Small family goes to church and discovers a wariness in the community not only toward them, but toward the caretaker of the house, Mr. Pluto, as well. Thomas expects the community to welcome them and come to the house to visit, but they do not. Instead, the Small family goes for a drive through their new town and stops at the college for lunch. When they return home, they discover that someone has broken into



the house and destroyed the kitchen. Mr. Small marches off to accuse Mr. Pluto of the vandalism, but discovers that Mr. Pluto has been protecting the property for years against the Darrow family, a local family who are convinced that Dies Drear left behind a great treasure and it should belong to the Darrows.

Mr. Small and Thomas plot with Mr. Pluto and his son, Mayhew, to scare away the Darrows. They lay in wait in theatrical makeup and frighten the Darrows, wounding their pride, and convincing them to leave Mr. Pluto alone. Afterward, Mr. Pluto agrees to allow Mr. Small to catalogue the impressive treasure collection Dies Drear left behind after his death.



# Chapters 1-2

## Chapters 1-2 Summary

This novel takes place in a house that once was an important stop on the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad was a network of people and places that helped slaves escape North, most often into Canada, before the Civil War. Helping slaves escape was considered a crime and those caught were often jailed or murdered. For this reason, many stops on the Underground Railroad utilized tunnels and secret rooms to hide runaway slaves.

In chapter 1, Thomas sits in the family car, thinking fondly of his great-grandmother and how much he will miss her now that the family is moving to Ohio. However, Thomas is excited about the move because his father has rented a home for them that was once an important stop on the Underground Railroad. The house was owned by a white abolitionist named Dies Drear. Dies Drear dies violently when he is caught helping three slaves escape, along with two of those slaves. It is rumored that Dies Drear and the two slaves still haunt his house. In fact, no one has lived in the house longer than a few weeks in more than a hundred years because of these rumored hauntings.

In chapter 2, Thomas' father tells him how Dies Drear not only helped slaves reach Canada, but he also gave slaves money so that they could return to help other slaves escape. Dies Drear is so well respected that he is called Selah, meaning Freedom, by the slave community. Mr. Small also tells Thomas about Mr. Pluto, the caretaker at the house. His name is not really Mr. Pluto, but the people of the community call him that after the god Hades who is the god of the Underworld.

## Chapters 1-2 Analysis

In these chapters the reader meets the main character and begins to understand the conflict that will propel the plot. Thomas Small is a young man, perhaps thirteen or fourteen, who has just been uprooted by his father to move from the home he has known most of his life to a new home in Ohio. Thomas is fascinated by the history of his new home. This home was built by a white abolitionist who helped slaves escape the south before the Civil War. Thomas' father is a history professor, so Thomas already knows about the Underground Railroad and the thousands of slaves who escaped slavery thanks to the people who were involved in the railroad. However, living in a house with secret tunnels and rooms where slaves were hidden brings that history to life, which excites the historian in Thomas.

The reader learns a great deal about Dies Drear, the abolitionist, in these chapters. Dies Drear is a rich man from New England who comes to Ohio for the express purpose of helping slaves. Dies Drear builds his house with this in mind, therefore the house is built with many secret spaces to protect the runaway slaves. Dies Drear also provides



money to many slaves to aid in their escape. This suggests to Thomas a great deal of wealth may be associated with the house. Finally, Thomas learns that the house is thought to be haunted. No one has lived in the house for more than a few weeks in more than one hundred years. This too excites Thomas—the idea that Dies Drear and two slaves continue to haunt the home that helped so many slaves escape the south. Thomas is confident that he and his family will be able to befriend these ghosts and live in the house safely, but the reader wonders what chased the other occupants out so quickly and how the Small family will survive such a frightening experience.



# Chapters 3-4

## Chapters 3-4 Summary

In chapter 3, the Small family arrives at the house of Dies Drear. The house is quite large and imposing, appearing almost frightening in the gloom of a rainstorm as it looks down on the family from its perch on the top of a hill. Thomas' mother is a little frightened by the house, but Thomas is excited. Thomas helps his mother carry his twin brothers into the house where the family discovers the caretaker, Mr. Pluto, has already arranged their furniture. Thomas finds the arrangement offensive, however, convinced Mr. Pluto arranged it in such a way as to suggest they would be better off leaving. However, Thomas' parents are thrilled by the thoughtfulness of the caretaker. Thomas takes the twins out on the verandah where he questions their queer reaction to the heavy front door. Thomas takes a closer look at the door and discovers a button that causes the front porch steps to slide away and reveal a tunnel entrance. Before Thomas can explore the tunnel, however, a young girl arrives on horseback.

In chapter 4, a girl on horseback followed by a large boy about Thomas' age come around the side of the house. The boy and the girl are arguing because the boy wants the girl to go home. When the children see Thomas, they ask why he is at the house. Thomas learns the children are Mack Darrow and an orphaned girl named Sarah, but called Pesty. Thomas sends them away so that he might explore the tunnel under the porch steps. Thomas falls into the hole, missing the steps completely. Thomas then begins walking the tunnel, using a small flashlight he had in his pocket. However, Thomas drops the flashlight and is plunged into complete darkness, unable to find where the flashlight went. Thomas begins to retrace his steps, but a sound like heavy breathing frightens him. Thomas runs until he reaches a solid wall. After a few minutes, the wall opens and exposes the kitchen where Thomas' family is sitting down to a meal.

## Chapters 3-4 Analysis

The Small family arrives at the house of Dies Drears. From the description of the outside of the house, the reader can understand why someone would think the house was haunted. It sounds as though the house is large and formidable, sitting on a hill over a cliff that plunges into a natural spring. This could be a beautiful setting on a clear day, but when the Small family arrives it is raining and overcast, adding to the legend of the house. The writer does a wonderful job making a simple house appear to have a fearful personality of its own with her description of it.

Thomas is put off by the caretaker's arrangement of the furniture, convinced it is arranged in such a way to discourage the family from staying. Thomas appears to be of a suspicious mind, already set for conflict with the caretaker who has cared for the house for many, many years. This could lead to some misunderstandings as the novel continues to develop. Later, Thomas finds a tunnel that runs under the house, but is



frightened when he hears a strange noise. Thomas thinks this is one of the ghosts he has heard so much about, but he never sees or feels anything that confirms this fact. However, this episode adds to the creepiness of the house, suggesting to the reader that the house could in fact be haunted, as Thomas suspects.





# Chapters 5-7

## Chapters 5-7 Summary

In chapter 5, Thomas tells his father about the breathing sound in the tunnel. Mr. Small walks through the tunnel, but does not see or hear anything. Mr. Small takes the mechanism out of both the sliding kitchen wall and the tunnel entrance under the porch to keep Thomas or anyone else from getting into the tunnel again unescorted. Over their meal, Thomas and his father discuss all the tunnels that exist in the house.

In chapter 6, Thomas goes outside to look all around the house so that he might be able to guess where all the secret passages and rooms might be. Thomas climbs the hill in an attempt to see the house more clearly. Thomas lays in the grass and falls asleep for a short time. When Thomas wakes, he again hears the sighing sound again. Thomas begins to walk through the now dark woods and comes across some wooden planks that are hidden in the ground. Before Thomas can investigate closer, a man calls out for him to get off of his house. Thomas begins to run. Someone chases Thomas and nearly catches him. Thomas runs faster and bursts through the kitchen door in his family's house.

In chapter 7, Thomas' father comes to see what the noise is and finds Mr. Pluto standing on the veranda by the now broken kitchen door. Mr. Small welcomes Mr. Pluto into the house and thanks him for getting the house ready for the family. Thomas notices that Mr. Small is looking at Mr. Pluto oddly, glancing often at the new gloves on Mr. Pluto's hands.

## Chapters 5-7 Analysis

Thomas is frightened by a breathing sound in the tunnel, but his father can find no evidence of ghosts or anything else. Thomas' father then removes the mechanism that allows anyone to enter the tunnel, protecting Thomas from another adventure. However, this is not the only tunnel in the house. Thomas is aware that many of the rooms in the house are not as large as they should be, suggesting hidden rooms and more siding walls. Thomas' father promises to explore with him, but Thomas wants to guess where these passages might be, so he goes outside to look the house over a little more thoroughly.

Thomas is a very curious little boy and his father's stories about the history of the house have only increased his curiosity. Thomas has also developed some animosity against the caretaker, Mr. Pluto, based perhaps in part because of the nickname "Pluto" given to the old man by the people in town. This suggests the devil to Thomas and makes him think Mr. Pluto is an evil man. This is underscored when Thomas walks on a trap door that turns out to be the roof of Mr. Pluto's house, causing Mr. Pluto to chase him through the woods. Mr. Small finds something curious about Mr. Pluto, but Thomas cannot figure

out what that might be, except to believe that his father's reaction to Mr. Pluto underscores his own conviction that Mr. Pluto is the devil.



## Chapters 8-9

### Chapters 8-9 Summary

In chapter 8, Thomas is given his first cup of coffee as he watches his father puzzle something out about Mr. Pluto. Thomas goes up to bed soon after, but he dislikes his room because of a heavy chair Mr. Pluto sat in front of the fireplace. Thomas finds it intrusive and creepy. Thomas also wants to keep watch for ghosts, so he decides to sleep in the parlor. As soon as his parents are quiet in their room, Thomas checks on the twins and then goes into the parlor where he quickly falls into a deep sleep. While the Small family sleeps, someone comes in through the mirror in the hall and places something in the door frame of each room where a family member sleeps.

In chapter 9, Thomas wakes and finds his church clothes laid out for him. Thomas dresses and goes in search of his family, but finds no one downstairs. Upstairs, Thomas finds his mother and father discussing small triangles they find in the doorjamb of each of their bedrooms. Mr. Small makes a diagram of one and then tries fitting the three together. Mr. Small discovers that four triangles will fit together to form a Greek cross. Mr. Small agrees with Thomas this time when he suggests the triangles are some kind of warning to leave the house. Mr. Small is not concerned, however, and he urges the family to hurry in their preparations for church.

Thomas accompanies his father outside and they see Mr. Pluto riding to church in his horse drawn wagon with Pesty. As they watch the wagon move away, Mr. Small asks Thomas about the breathing sound he heard the night before. After listening to the description, Mr. Small tells Thomas that Mr. Pluto is a blacksmith and what he heard was more than likely his bellows.

### Chapters 8-9 Analysis

Thomas continues to believe that there are no ghosts at the house of Dies Drear, only Mr. Pluto attempting to keep people from wanting to live in the house. For this reason, Thomas continues to see signs of warning in everything Mr. Pluto has done around the house, including the positioning of an arm chair in his own bedroom. Therefore, it is no surprise that Thomas believes Mr. Pluto sneaks into their home and leaves triangles in the door frames of each of the occupied bedrooms. The reader is drawn to this conclusion as well, if only because the reader sees the person enter the house through a mirror that Mr. Pluto intentionally leaves in the house. Perhaps the mirror covers another tunnel, one that Mr. Pluto would more than likely know about.

The triangles are an interesting item. The reader is unsure what the triangle represents, but Mr. Small seems to think it is a cross that has something to do with telling direction. This makes the reader wonder what else these triangles might stand for and what warning they are truly meant to give.



# Chapters 10-12

## Chapters 10-12 Summary

In chapter 10, the Small family attends church. The congregation appears the same as any other church to Thomas, but this impression changes when Mr. Pluto arrives. Thomas notices that the churchgoers seem somewhat afraid of Mr. Pluto and that the preacher delays the service for the old man. Afterward, the preacher greets them warmly, but no one else in the congregation seems as friendly as Thomas thought they would be.

In chapter 11, Mr. Small takes the family to the university where he will be teaching so that they might have dinner in the university cafeteria. The family takes a short tour of the campus and Thomas gets to see his father's office high in a tower. In the office, Thomas and Mr. Small find another triangle like the three in their house. Mr. Small sees this as another warning. Afterward, the family goes in search of a locksmith to fix the broken kitchen door lock. There are no locksmiths in town, but they are directed to the Carr filling station. There Mr. Small speaks to the oldest boy who tells him he will fix the door the following day. Mr. Carr also shares some gossip about the area, including rumors of some kind of feud between the Darrow family and Mr. Pluto.

In chapter 12, the Small family finishes their tour of the town and return home. The kitchen in their new home has been destroyed, the dishes broken and flour and water thrown on every surface.

## Chapters 10-12 Analysis

Thomas and his family go to church, a social event that in the past is always a welcoming moment, a time when the neighbors come over and get to know the family. However, this church gathering proves to be quite different. The congregation appears afraid to reach out to the new family. Thomas believes it is because of Mr. Pluto. However, the introduction of the Darrow family in this chapter leaves the reader wondering if perhaps it is not them that the congregation is afraid of. This seems to be underscored by the discovery from Mr. Carr that the Darrows and Mr. Pluto have been feuding for many years.

The Small family tours their new home and then returns to the house to discover the kitchen has been destroyed. First impressions leave Mrs. Small convinced it is the work of a ghost, but Mr. Small seems to believe it is someone else. Who that might be, the reader is not clear at this point, but Mr. Pluto seems to be an obvious choice.



# Chapters 13-15

## Chapters 13-15 Summary

In chapter 13, Thomas follows as his father marches up the hill. Thomas and his father come across a clearing where they see Mr. Pluto smoking a cigarette and pacing. When Mr. Small calls out to Mr. Pluto, Mr. Pluto disappears into a cave. Mr. Small and Thomas follow, finding inside a bed and a blacksmith's bellows, but no Mr. Pluto. Mr. Small paces the room, searching the walls, until finally he sees a rope dangling from one wall. Mr. Small pulls it and discovers it opens another secret wall.

In chapter 14, Mr. Small and Thomas go into the tunnel hidden in Mr. Pluto's cave only to find Mr. Pluto in a room surrounded by many treasures, including expensive rugs and glass bottles. Pesty is there too, dusting the glass bottles. Mr. Pluto tells the Smalls how he accidentally found this room after years of speculation and search. The Darrows, beginning with River Swift Darrow, have been searching for the treasures in this room for many, many years, convinced it should belong to them. Mr. Pluto has spent just as many years protecting it, losing his wife and only child in the process.

In chapter 15, another man has joined them, one dressed in makeup to make himself resemble Mr. Pluto. It turns out this is Mayhew Skinner, Mr. Pluto's son. Mayhew comes home when he learns his father is ill and has been dressing as him to keep the Darrows off track. Mayhew explains his father's driving need to protect the treasures and how he was afraid of the Smalls as well. However, Mr. Pluto and Mayhew both have come to realize they must trust the Smalls to keep the Darrows away. Mayhew then walks home with the Smalls and tells them that he has a plan to stop the Darrows from bothering either Mr. Pluto or the Smalls ever again.

## Chapters 13-15 Analysis

Thomas gets to see Mr. Pluto's home and discovers he lives in a cave. Not only that, but Mr. Pluto has placed a wooden trap door at the top of his cave to help him be aware when someone comes around the cave who has not been invited. Mr. Small then discovers a hidden passageway in the cave that leads him to a treasure room where Dies Drear once kept his most valuable antiques. This source of income for the runaway slaves has remained hidden for more than a hundred years, but is sought by fortune hunters, most especially the Darrow family with whom Mr. Pluto has had a feud for many years. The revelation of this room and the feud helps Mr. Small to understand Mr. Pluto's behaviors and the events that have taken place in the area since the Smalls arrived.

Thomas has made Mr. Pluto out to be the devil from the beginning of the book, based in part by his nickname of Pluto. However, it turns out that Mr. Pluto is not the devil, but the Darrows are. It is all about money. It was the Darrows who trashed the Smalls' kitchen



to persuade them to leave the house so that the Darrows might be free to search for the treasure. However, in an ironic twist of fate, their attempt has caused the Smalls to find the treasure and to become determined to protect it.



# Chapters 16-17

## Chapters 16-17 Summary

In chapter 16, Mayhew helps clean up the kitchen while describing his plan. Even Mrs. Small becomes involved, asking to be a ghost in Mayhew's plan. Mayhew asks Thomas and his father to go to a theatrical store for him the next day while he arranges to have his father placed in the hospital to both trick the Darrows and to have his condition assessed by doctors. Mayhew then shows them the tunnel behind the mirror in the hall, suggesting this is how the Darrows have been gaining access to the house.

In chapter 17, Mr. Pluto refuses to go into the hospital. When Mr. Small tries to convince him by suggesting the treasure is not his alone to care for, Mayhew corrects him by saying that Dies Drear left his treasure to the first ancestor of slaves who found it. It is then that Mr. Small learns that Mr. Pluto is a direct descendent of the slave who escaped the night Dies Drear and two other slaves were killed. Mr. Small then shows Mr. Pluto the four triangles and learns that the triangles were originally left for slaves to read to show them the direction in which they were to travel. Finally Mayhew and Mr. Small agree to allow Mr. Pluto to take part in their scheme.

## Chapters 16-17 Analysis

Mayhew proves to be a kind, gentle man who wants to protect the treasure so that his father might be allowed to retire. This gesture seems kind, but the reader sees that Mayhew also has some anger toward his father for placing this treasure before Mayhew and his mother. This is a conflict that is somewhat confusing to both Mayhew and the reader, but does not stop Mayhew from enlisting the help of the Smalls to stop the Darrows from stealing a treasure Mayhew believes belongs to his father and thus himself.

The Smalls learn more history about the Underground Railroad, including the use of the triangles to show a runaway slave which way to go without leaving such a large clue that the police and anyone else hunting the slave would be able to read the signs. The use of these triangles rings true to the reader, inspiring some readers to research the Underground Railroad, perhaps an underlying intention of the writers.



# Chapters 18-19

## Chapters 18-19 Summary

In chapter 18, Thomas waits, lying flat on his tummy in the darkness. Thomas knows his father and Mayhew are somewhere nearby, also waiting in a specific position to hide the glowing makeup they all wear. They are waiting for the Darrow brothers to arrive outside Mr. Pluto's cave, but it seems they have waited for hours and hours. Finally Thomas hears the noise of the Darrow brothers approaching. They wait until the Darrows are in the clearing. Mr. Pluto confronts them, yelling at them with his blanket attached in such a way that it looks like he has wings. Pesty appears at the edge of the clearing on horseback, appearing to be a flying horse. Thomas, his father, and Mayhew step out of the woods, dressed to resemble Dies Drear and the two dead slaves. The Darrows are so scared they run away.

In chapter 19, Mayhew and Mr. Pluto believe their trick has been a success and the shame of the trick will keep the Darrows away for a long time. Mayhew walks the Smalls home, explaining that he will be leaving now that Mr. Pluto appears to be safe. In the morning, Thomas wakes to discover his father has already left to catalog the treasures in Dies Drear's cavern. Thomas goes over and finds his father hard at work and learns that the job of cataloging the items will take many years, at least long enough so that Mr. Pluto will die before seeing any of it taken away.

## Chapters 18-19 Analysis

The Smalls, Mr. Pluto, Mayhew, and Pesty scare the Darrows so badly, and wound their pride, that they will more than likely never trespass on the Dies Drear property again. This solves one problem for Mr. Pluto. However, Mr. Small knows the treasures belong to the foundation that owns the house and that it will all have to be shown to them eventually. However, being a kind man, Mr. Small decides to catalog it all first, giving Mr. Pluto time to adjust to the idea, or even die, before the treasures are removed from his care.

In the end, Thomas has learned that the house is not haunted, but he has learned more history regarding the house and slavery than he ever thought imaginable. This makes the whole experience of living in the house of Dies Drear one that Thomas will not soon forget.





# Characters

## Thomas Small

Thomas Small is the narrator of the book. Thomas is a young boy, around twelve or fourteen, who has just been uprooted by his father and moved to Ohio from their home in North Carolina. Thomas is sad to leave behind family and friends, especially his great-grandmother, but excited about the house his father is taking him to live in. The house was once a stop on the Underground Railroad, a series of places and people where slaves could get help making their escape north. Thomas, as a young black boy, has a special interest in this history not only because of his heritage, but because his father is a historian who has filled him with stories of the past.

Thomas immediately becomes convinced that the house, which is reportedly haunted, is not haunted, but harassed by the local caretaker. Thomas believes the caretaker does not want anyone to live in the house and has therefore scared every tenant away over the past many years he has cared for the place. This idea seems reinforced by the way in which the caretaker has placed the furniture in the house and the way he tries to scare Thomas when he is exploring in the woods one night. However, Thomas will soon learn that his opinion of Mr. Pluto, the caretaker, is more strongly influenced by an idea than by actual facts.

## Walter Small

Walter Small is Thomas' father. Mr. Small is a history professor who will be teaching at the university near the house of Dies Drear. For this reason, Mr. Small has rented the house of Dies Drear in hopes of coming into contact with the real history that exists in the house and learning more about the people who made up the Underground Railroad. Mr. Small's wife is weary about this move, afraid of some of the rumors that the house is haunted. However, Mr. Small's son, Thomas, is thrilled by the idea of living in a haunted house. Mr. Small, however, suspects the house is not haunted and will quickly be able to prove this fact as he learns more about Dies Drear and the caretaker of his home.

## Henry

Henry Skinner, or Mr. Pluto, is the caretaker of the house of Dies Drear. Mr. Pluto has lived in the area since he was a small child and has heard all the rumors about Dies Drear and his house. As a child, Mr. Pluto was good friends with River Swift Darrow, a local farmer's boy. However, as the two men grew to adulthood and heard about the treasure rumored to still exist in the house of Dies Drear, they fall to opposite sides as both attempt to find the treasure. Mr. Pluto earns his nickname as he moves into a cave and works to protect the treasure of Dies Drear. River Swift, however, works to find the treasure so that he might use it to make his family rich. For many, many years Mr. Pluto protects something he himself cannot find. However, his obsession causes his wife and



son to leave him. Eventually, Mr. Pluto finds the treasure and spends the rest of his life protecting it. In time, Mr. Pluto becomes ill and finds himself forced to share his secret first with his son and later with Mr. Small. Both Mr. Small and Mr. Pluto's son work to make sure the Darrows never learn the location of the treasure.

## **Mayhew Skinner**

Mayhew Skinner is Mr. Pluto's son. Mayhew is an actor who returns to his hometown to help his father when he learns Mr. Pluto is ill. Mayhew is deeply angry with his father for choosing the treasure of Dies Drear over family, but Mayhew also loves and respects the history of the house of Dies Drear, therefore he agrees to help protect the treasure. Mayhew uses his skills as an actor to trick the Darrow brothers and stop them from trying to find the treasure.

## **River Swift Darrow**

River Swift Darrow is a member of the Darrow family who wants the treasure of Dies Drear. Mr. Pluto and River Swift are children together and both grow up hearing about Dies Drear and his wealth. River decides the money belongs to his family because his family is part of an Indian tribe that once owned the land. However, River wants to take the money and use it for personal gain. Mr. Pluto wants to protect the money and the history for which it stands.

## **The Darrow Boys**

The Darrow brothers, three young adult men, are still trying to find the treasure their grandfather has been searching for since he was a young man. Mr. Pluto finds himself forced to protect his home and the Dies Drear property from these young men. For this reason, Mayhew decides to trick the Darrow brothers and frighten them into staying away from Mr. Pluto and his home. In the end, Mayhew is successful and the Darrow brothers leave Mr. Pluto to enjoy his treasure until his death.

## **Pesty**

Pesty is a young orphan girl who has been adopted by the Darrow family. Pesty's name is Sarah, but everyone seems to have a different nickname for her, Pesty being the most prominent. Pesty has befriended Mr. Pluto and she is one of only a few people who know where the treasure is located in a cavern underground. Pesty and Mr. Pluto are very close, sometimes each other's only companion.



## **Mack Darrow**

Mack Darrow is the youngest of the Darrow brothers. Mack is Thomas' age. Thomas wants to make friends with Mack, but Mack keeps away from him because his family's desire to find the treasure of Dies Drear. In the end, however, Mack sees through his family's obsession with the Dies Drear treasure and decides to befriend Thomas.

## **Mrs. Small**

Mrs. Small is Thomas' mother. Mrs. Small is not happy having to move to Ohio and does not like the house of Dies Drear when she first sees it. However, Mrs. Small understands the history of the house and the excitement her son and husband see in it, so Mrs. Small accepts the move. In fact, Mrs. Small offers to help scare the Darrow brothers away in order to protect the treasure of Dies Drear.

## **Dies Drear**

Dies Drear is an abolitionist who lives in New England before moving to Ohio to build a house that will become a central stop on the Underground Railroad. Dies Drear not only helps slaves escape north to Canada, but he often gives them money and returns them to slavery so that they can use the money to help other slaves escape. Dies Drear is eventually caught by southern slave owners and killed along with two other slaves. For many years it has been thought that Dies Drear and those slaves continue to haunt his house.



# Objects/Places

## Great-Grandmother's Fence

Thomas is concerned about who will paint his great-grandmother's house after he moves to Ohio.

## Triangles

The Small family find four triangles that the Darrows have left in their house and Mr. Small's office to frighten them away. Later the Smalls learn that the triangle are actually route markers that slaves use to find their way to the next stop on the Underground Railroad.

## House of Dies Drear

The house of Dies Drear is a house in Ohio that is once an important stop on the Underground Railroad.

## Mr. Pluto's Cave

Mr. Pluto lives in a cave on the hill above the house of Dies Drear. Inside the cave, Mr. Pluto discovers a fake wall that leads to a cavern where Dies Drear hid the bulk of his antiques before his murder.

## Mr. Pluto's Bellows

Thomas hears a breathing sound while exploring the tunnel under the house of Dies Drear. Thomas is frightened by the noise until he learns it is actually the bellows Mr. Pluto uses for his blacksmithing work.

## Arm Chair

There is a heavy arm chair in Thomas' bedroom that frightens him the first night he is in the house of Dies Drear.

## Kitchen Wall

There is a wall in the kitchen of the house in Dies Drear that slides open to reveal a tunnel that runs under the house.



## **Porch Steps**

There is a tunnel hidden under the porch steps that open when someone pushes a button on the front door.

## **Mirror**

There is a large, heavy mirror in the hallway of the house of Dies Drear that covers the opening to a tunnel that runs under the house and onto the farm owned by the Darrow family. It is through this tunnel that the Darrow brothers get access to the house of Dies Drear.

## **Dies Drear's Treasure**

Thomas and his father discover that Dies Drear hid a wealth of glass and expensive rugs in a cavern under Mr. Pluto's cave. This treasure has been a myth for many years that has caused men all over the county to feud in their search for it.

## **University**

Mr. Small is a historian and he will teach history at the university across town from the house of Dies Drear.

## **Church**

Thomas Small finds the church near the house of Dies Drear to be less friendly than the churches back in North Carolina.



# Themes

## History

This novel begins with the Small family moving to a house in Ohio based on the fact that the house is of historical significance. The house is once an important stop on the Underground Railroad. Mr. Small learns about the house through a foundation that cares for historical sites such as this one. Mr. Small chooses to move to the house based almost solely on its historical worth. However, the house is also thought to be haunted, a fact that both intrigues and causes suspicion in Mr. Small. The idea also excites Mr. Small's son, Thomas.

When the Small family arrives at the house, they begin to explore the tunnels and hidden rooms throughout the house that were used to conceal the runaway slaves. At the same time, these same tunnels are used against the Smalls as the Darrows break in and try to scare them away. In time, the Smalls learn that the Darrows are looking for the rumored treasure Dies Drear left in the house. The Smalls are able to scare the Darrows away and at the same time learn that the Darrows misunderstood the use of the triangles they use to scare the Smalls away. The triangles, it turns out, are actually small directional clues for the runaway slaves. It is a piece of history that the Smalls are more than thrilled to learn about. The history in this novel is important to the overall development of the plot, making history a major theme of the novel.

## Deceit

The Smalls are told that the house of Dies Drear is haunted. No one has lived in the house longer than a few weeks in more than a hundred years. Thomas Small is excited about this idea and he wants to find proof of the ghosts. Mr. Small, however, appears to have other ideas about what is happening at the house. Upon arriving at the house, the reader quickly learns about the tunnels that run under the house in which the runaway slaves once hid. Thomas thinks he can hear someone breathing in these tunnels, but later learns it is the blacksmithing bellows that the caretaker, Mr. Pluto, uses.

As the novel continues to develop, the Smalls learn about the long running feud between the Darrow family and Mr. Pluto. In time they come to realize it has to do with the treasures Dies Drear left behind after his murder. Mr. Pluto has found it and has spent many years trying to protect it. To do this, however, he has to hide it from everyone. This causes Mr. Pluto to lie and hide things from the people around him. Mr. Small quickly catches on to Mr. Pluto's deceit, helping him figure things out a little quicker. The Smalls then help out with Mayhew Skinner's plan to scare the Darrow boys away by making them think the ghost stories are true and that Dies Drear's ghost still roams the area. For these reasons, deceit is a major theme of the novel.



## Family

Family is an important element to this novel's plot. The main characters are the Smalls, a young black family that has uprooted itself to live in a house full of history. This family are close and caring, a family that sticks together to make things work no matter their circumstances. In fact, this family gives the impression that they will make it through any obstacle no matter the cost because they are so close.

The Darrow family is also close and they spend a great deal of their time together. However, the Darrows stick together because they are isolated; the people of the community are frightened by the violence in their family. The Darrows are the darker side of family in this novel, representing a family on the other side of the spectrum from the Small family.

The Skinners are a broken family. Mr. Pluto is a lonely old man who devotes his life to protecting the treasure of Dies Drear. For this reason, Mr. Pluto's wife and son move away and leave him alone. Mayhew Skinner, Mr. Pluto's son, comes back when he learns that his father is sick and needs someone to look after him. This appears to show concern, but the reader realizes that Mayhew is filled with anger toward his father and only comes home out of a sense of responsibility. However, Mayhew does what is necessary to help his father, showing the reader that there is some love there even if Mayhew denies it.



# Style

## Point of View

The novel is written in the third person point of view with Thomas Small as the narrating character. Thomas tells the story from the viewpoint of a child who has just been forced to move from the only home he has ever known in order to live in a historic house several states away. Thomas is a smart, curious young man, but he does not have the same insight as some of the adults in the novel. For this reason, the reader does not learn the truth about the haunting at the house of Dies Drear until later than some of the other characters because Thomas does not put the facts together until much later in the novel.

The point of view of this novel is a common third person point of view. The reader sees the actions of the plot through the eyes of the main character Thomas Small and knows all his thoughts and emotions. There are also times in which the narration will switch to another character for a short period of time to add suspense to the novel. However, the primary narrator is Thomas, a child who takes a little longer to figure out the mystery of the plot, leaving the reader with an almost unreliable narrator because it takes Thomas so much longer than some of the other characters to figure out the facts surrounding the activities taking place in the plot.

## Setting

The novel is set in a small university town in Ohio. The family, the Smalls, move to this town so that they can live in a house that is once an important stop on the Underground Railroad. This house is filled with history, exposing this family to information they might know but never really understand until they move to this house and see the hidden tunnels and the hideaway rooms.

The setting of this novel is very important to the overall plot because the entire plot of the novel is centered around the house of Dies Drear. The house is what remains of a once important stop on the Underground Railroad, a place where runaway slaves can hide on their journey to Canada and freedom or where they can learn how to help other slaves escape their captivity. This setting teaches the characters, and the readers, about this important place in history. This house is also the central figure in a mystery regarding the man who owned it, Dies Drear, making the house almost a character in the overall plot of the novel.

## Language and Meaning

The novel is written for young readers, therefore the language is simple. The novel is written in an English that is less formal than some novels directed toward older readers and it contains little or no words that a young reader might not immediately recognize. In





fact, the novel contains no foreign phrases, no technical terms and little slang or formal grammar. For this reason, the novel is simple and easy to read.

The novel's language fits the age level of the readers for whom it has been written. There is no reason to suspect that a young reader will have any difficulty reading this novel despite the rich amount of history to be found in its chapters. The novel is simple, but not so simple that an older reader will not find it entertaining. The novel is well written and the language works with both the subject and the age level of the intended audience.

## Structure

The novel is divided into nineteen chapters. The chapters vary in length, with some containing fewer than ten pages while others are as long as thirty pages. The novel is told in both exposition and dialogue, providing scenes to the reader, not just telling a story without elaboration. The novel is written in such a way that the reader feels pulled into the story and entertained, not simply told a story.

The novel contains one main plot and several subplots. The main plot follows the Small family as they spend the first few days in their new home in Ohio. The house is one that was built to be a stop on the Underground Railroad, therefore it has many tunnels and hidden rooms throughout. This proves to be both entertaining for the Small family and a means of allowing strangers into the house to harass and attempt to run them off. One subplot follows the story of Henry Skinner, the caretaker the local people call Mr. Pluto. Mr. Pluto is described as the devil, but the reader eventually discovers that Mr. Pluto is simply attempting to do the right thing. Another subplot follows the attempts of the Darrow family to find a treasure they are convinced should belong to their family. The main plot and subplots all reach a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



## Quotes

"Of the one hundred thousand slaves who fled from the South to Canada between 1810 and 1850, forty thousand of them had passed through Ohio. Thomas didn't know why this fact surprised him, yet it did." Chapter 1, pp. 11-12.

"Selah, a desperate, running slave might sigh, and the name—the man—gave him strength to go on." Chapter 2, p. 19.

"Whoever old Pluto is, he thought, he sure takes good care of things." Chapter 6, p. 73.

"And framed by the night stood that massive, black and bearded man some souls called Pluto." Chapter 6, p. 82.

"Soundlessly the mirror closed. Whatever stood there in front of it gave back no reflection in the totally dark house." Chapter 8, p. 105.

"Folks will come to visit here just like they did at home, he told himself. I'll have friends like I never had before, you wait and see." Chapter 9, p. 109.

"What kind of place is this North anyway? What kind of a no-account place!" Chapter 10, p. 145.

"And he saw houses on streets where you couldn't tell what kind of people might live in them." Chapter 12, p. 165.

"We are Tuscaroras. He is my chief and I am his brave son." Chapter 13, p. 172.

"They had to walk down a wet, slippery ramp of chalk-white limestone, with enormous stalactites hanging just above their heads." Chapter 14, p. 183.

"With the most delicate motion, he peeled away the corners of his face just below the ear and let it hang in shreds around his mouth." Chapter 14, p. 198.

"And they didn't mind the waiting, not this day nor the days to come. They had years." Chapter 19, p. 279.



## Topics for Discussion

Who is Thomas Small? Why is he traveling to Ohio in the first chapter? What does he read on his father's desk that his father expressly asks him not to read? What does Thomas learn that he believes his father is attempting to hide? Does this information affect Thomas' anticipation of reaching his final destination in Ohio? If so, how?

What does Mr. Small do for a living? How does this profession lead Mr. Small to move his family to Ohio? What comes first, the job or the house? Why is Mr. Small so interested in the house of Dies Drear? Does his family support his interest? For what reason? What is Mr. Small leaving behind in North Carolina? How does this influence his future choices?

Who is Dies Drear? Why is Thomas so fascinated by him? What does Dies Drear do during his lifetime? Why does Dies Drear build his house the way he did? What causes Dies Drear's death? Why do people believe Dies Drear still haunts his house? Does he? What proof might there be to support your conclusions?

Who is Mr. Pluto? Why is he called Pluto? Is this his real name? What job does Mr. Pluto have? Why does Mr. Small decide to keep Mr. Pluto at his job? Why does Thomas believe Mr. Pluto wants his family to leave the house of Dies Drear? What does Thomas see in the arrangement of the family's furniture in the house that makes him feel Mr. Pluto is evil or up to no good? Why does Thomas dislike his own bedroom?

What does Thomas find while exploring in the woods behind the house? What does a voice say to Thomas as he stumbles on this find? Why does Thomas run away? What is strange about the fact that the voice manages to chase and catch Thomas in the darkness? What does Mr. Small notice about this man that makes him question his identity? Who do Mr. Small and Thomas believe this man to be? Who is he really?

Who are the Darrows? Why are they a threat to Mr. Pluto? Why does Mayhew decide to attempt to scare these men away? Why do they not call the police? What do the Darrows do to the Smalls' kitchen? For what reason? Does this act have its intended impact? Why or why not?

What are the small triangles Mr. Small finds in the bedroom doorframes and later in his office? What does he discover they form? What does Mr. Small believe them to be? What are they really? What does Mr. Pluto tell them about the triangles? Why does Mr. Pluto say you should never touch one if you see it? Why were these triangles used?