

Pollyanna Short Guide

Pollyanna by Eleanor H. Porter

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Overview

In a fundamentally honest and straightforward way, Porter examines the trials of life—poverty, loneliness, and illness—and concludes that a cheerful child's presence can alleviate social and personal bitterness. Pollyanna makes people see the good in life rather than the sad and negative. The book is not, however, a sermon, nor is its tone preachy. It is a solid adventure romance tale with many familiar but engaging elements. The poor orphan girl arrives in a strange place, lives in the "big house on the hill," and, through her liveliness and curiosity, explores and conquers a new environment. High spirited and free of prejudice, Pollyanna is the only person in the small New England town willing to talk and associate with everyone. Nothing she does is cruel; when she breaks a rule, it usually results in some good for someone else.

One reason to read this book is to examine firsthand one of the most popular and influential books of the early twentieth century. The word "Pollyanna" has come to suggest a sentimental and simplistic outlook on life, but Pollyanna's vision of love and joy seems relevant in an age marked by cynicism and false sophistication. Pollyanna remains one of literature's irrepressible, effervescent characters, whose actions serve as an example for all those struggling to overcome difficulties.

About the Author

Eleanor Hodgman Porter was born on December 19, 1868, in Littleton, New Hampshire. Porter's mother was an invalid, and Porter herself suffered from ill health as a child and never finished high school. Although she later recovered and led an active outdoor life, her childhood experiences provided material for the story of Pollyanna and for Porter's other works of fiction. As a young woman, Porter studied at the New England Conservatory of Music and embarked upon a career as a singer, but changed her profession to writing after her marriage in 1892. Porter submitted stories to magazines, at first with little success. But from the time she published her first novel, *Cross Currents*, in 1907, until her death in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on May 21, 1920, Porter was a remarkably prolific and successful writer of fiction for young adults. Her popularity continued well after her death, and many of her works were published posthumously.

Porter's greatest fame followed the publication of *Pollyanna*. An international best seller, the book appeared in scores of editions in the U.S. and was translated into the major languages of Europe and Asia. The famous actress Mary Pickford paid the then huge sum of \$115,112 for the movie rights, and Pickford's silent film version of *Pollyanna* was a great success in 1920. There was even a "Mary Pickford Edition" of the book. Other stage and screen versions of *Pollyanna* continued to appear over the years, including the recent BBC serial production starring Elizabeth Archard.

Enthusiastic readers everywhere played the Glad Game and founded Glad Clubs.

Pollyanna's fans include adults as well as children and young adults. Porter's basic theme, namely that even in the darkest situations people can find something to be glad about, seemed to appeal to everyone. Even prison inmates founded a branch of the Glad Club.

Restaurants, resorts, apartment houses, commercial products, and babies were named after *Pollyanna*. One observer of the *Pollyanna* phenomenon commented that it was nearly as influential an event as the First World War. Eleanor Porter's *Pollyanna*, as both a literary creation and a cultural phenomenon, is one of the important and influential landmarks of the twentieth century.

Setting

The story takes place in a New England village in the early 1900s. Miss Polly Harrington has received word that her eleven-year-old niece has been orphaned, and the "Ladies Aid" wants Miss Polly to take Pollyanna into her home. Pollyanna is the daughter of Miss Polly's sister, who married a very poor young minister against the wishes of her wealthy family and was disowned. When the story begins, Miss Polly—the aristocratic Harrington family's only living descendant besides Pollyanna—is a rich, lonely spinster who feels obligated to care for her niece. Pollyanna arrives in Beldingsville, Vermont, and over the course of the novel not only has a dramatic effect on all those who live in the "big house on the hill," but also transforms the whole village from a rather stern, aloof town to a concerned, caring, and considerably more cheerful community.

Social Sensitivity

It should be noted that Pollyanna is one of the very few characters in all literature to have given a word to the language. Dictionary definitions of a "Pollyanna" range from "a blindly optimistic person" or "a foolishly optimistic person" to someone who is "fatuously or exasperatingly optimistic."

People often use the term to suggest a person who is insensitive to the suffering and evil in the world, someone who persists in being optimistic despite evidence to the contrary. This appears to be the meaning of the term "Pollyanna" as our culture has come to define it, but this is definitely not the meaning of "Pollyanna" as found in Eleanor Porter's novel. The real Pollyanna is anything but complacent, inane, and self-deceiving.

The Pollyanna of Porter's book feels deeply the suffering of those around her; because she has had more than her share of random, inexplicable pain and tragedy, she wishes to live fully and to make the best of everything, no matter how bleak the circumstances. Even though Porter's Pollyanna may possess some of the marks of a sentimental romance, its fundamental vision of suffering and joyful redemption is shared by much of the world's great literature.



Literary Qualities

Pollyanna successfully evokes the texture of life in small-town New England in the early 1900s. The use of country dialect and the rich regional flavor that marks the dialogue of such characters as Nancy and Old Tom typify the "local color" fiction popular early in the twentieth century.

Porter also skillfully employs imagery and symbolism. Miss Polly's "tight hair" represents her tight, aloof personality.

The various images of prisms and rainbows define Pollyanna's character, while the images of the crutches and the missionary barrel foreshadow the near tragic fate that awaits Pollyanna at the end of the book.

While some readers may tire of Pollyanna laughing "hysterically," breathing "tremulously" and "rapturously," smiling "eagerly," "bravely," and "cheerfully," the novel is generally satisfying, for it moves vivid characters along a tight plot line toward a satisfying resolution.



Themes and Characters

Pollyanna features some credible and compelling characters as well as some characters who serve primarily as stereotypes. Although Pollyanna is the main character, Aunt Polly and John Pendleton are also significant and perhaps more engaging, since they experience a dramatic transformation of character.

Pollyanna's optimism dominates her personality, even though she has endured poverty, deprivation, initial rejection by Aunt Polly, and a tragic automobile accident that threatens to make her an invalid for life. Because Pollyanna is a naive eleven-year-old, she sometimes seems tactless in her conduct of the Glad Game, such as when she tells Old Tom the gardener, who is bent over with arthritis, that he should be glad he is so close to the ground and does not have to stoop down so far to do his weeding. The innocent literalism of her remark to the gardener is a fundamental trait of her character and is characteristic of the behavior of many eleven-year-olds. Although Pollyanna makes mistakes and misreads situations, her intentions are always good.

Pollyanna's Aunt Polly is a bitter, stern woman who looks much older than her years; she always frowns and is "severe faced" and distant in her loneliness.

Pollyanna's presence works a gradual change in her, and at the end of the tale, quite convincingly, Miss Polly has become a warm, loving person.

John Pendleton serves as the mystery man of the novel, walking the village streets in his long black coat and high silk hat, never speaking to anyone until Pollyanna initiates what will become a life-changing friendship for him.

Wealthy and well-traveled, Pendleton has become a reclusive and rather cynical figure since Pollyanna's mother rejected him to marry the poor minister.

Pollyanna's presence transforms Pendleton, and although she does not move in with him as he desires, she does ease his loneliness and restore his ability to care for others.

An important secondary character is Dr. Chilton, who like Pendleton has been disillusioned in love. At first lonely in his pride, he too becomes a strong and heroic character by the end of the story.

Nancy, the hired girl, gets confused and does not always play the Glad Game in the right way, but she is devoted to making Pollyanna happy. The minor characters—Old Tom, Mrs. Snow, Mrs. Payson, the Reverend Ford, and Jimmy Bean—all find their lives much richer for Pollyanna's presence.

The story's sub-themes of duty, pride, loneliness, and invalidism are all linked to the overarching theme of the Glad Game that Pollyanna teaches the whole community to play. Pollyanna has perfected the game of "just being glad" no matter how



disappointing, difficult, or hopeless a situation might seem; she welcomes the challenge of a tough situation, saying "the harder 'tis, the more fun 'tis." When Pollyanna arrives at Miss Polly's, for example, she hopes for a lovely room with nice furniture and mirrors and pictures on the wall. Instead, she gets a bare room in the attic. She decides she can be happy where there are no mirrors, because she will not have to look at herself and see her freckles, and she can be happy that there are no pictures on the walls, because she has the best picture—a view of the countryside—through her window. The implicit symbolic equation is that if she had mirrors and pictures on the walls, then she might be spoiled and selfcentered instead of the outgoing child of nature that she is.

Pollyanna's greatest challenge occurs after the tragic automobile accident, when she almost yields to despair. But in a satisfying resolution of plot and thematic design, all of the villagers who have learned to play the Glad Game pull her out of despondence. Porter suggests that an individual's concern for others has the potential to generate communal reciprocation when it is most needed. At the end of the novel, Pollyanna writes a letter to Aunt Polly to tell her she can walk again, and she signs the letter, "with heaps of love to everybody." These are the last words of the book, and they reinforce its underlying themes.



Topics for Discussion

1. Discuss the images of rainbows and prisms. What does Mr. Pendleton mean when he says that Pollyanna is the "finest prism of them all"?
2. Discuss the symbolism of the missionary barrel and the crutches.
3. Look up the word "Pollyanna" in several dictionaries. Do these definitions reflect or describe the character of Pollyanna in this novel?
4. Aunt Polly demands of Pollyanna, "Will you stop using that everlasting word 'glad'! It's 'glad'—'glad'—'glad' from morning till night until I think I shall grow wild!" Do you get tired of hearing Pollyanna talking about being "glad"?

Why or why not?

5. Would the world be a better place if there were more people like Pollyanna?

Why or why not? List some of the world's best known altruists and activists. Are these people effective because they share or lack Pollyanna's "gladness"?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Analyze several examples of the Glad Game. How many examples of the game seem silly or foolish? How many seem like a good way of dealing with life's difficulties?
2. Write about the difference between optimism and pessimism. Does Pollyanna's optimism deny the reality of suffering? Is she insensitive to the pain of others?
3. In most books about a young person growing up, important lessons are learned from the adults in the story.

Does Pollyanna learn from the adults around her, or do the adults learn more from her? What do they learn?

4. Analyze the relationship between Aunt Polly and Pollyanna. What changes occur in their relationship? How does Aunt Polly change? Why does Pollyanna choose to stay with Aunt Polly when Mr. Pendleton asks her to come live with him?
5. Compare Pollyanna's character and maturity in *Pollyanna* and its sequel, *Pollyanna Grows Up*. Does the Glad Game change in the later book?



For Further Reference

Allentuck, Marcia E. "Old Books:Pollyanna by Eleanor M. Porter." *Georgia Review* (1960): 447-449. Although Allentuck find Pollyanna "almost embarrassingly encumbered by the trappings of indiscriminate gladness," she places it "in the tradition of those works which find man's adjustment and growth more arresting than his disenchantment and fall."

Benet, William Rose. *Reader's Encyclopedia*. Vol. 20. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1965. This brief passage finds Pollyanna a "synonym for the fatuous, irrepressible optimist."

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Fisher, Margery. *Who's Who in Children's Books*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975. This article finds Pollyanna "possibly the most exasperating heroine in fiction."

Kunitz, Stanley, and Howard Haycraft, eds. *Twentieth Century Authors*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1942. This work contains a good brief summary of Porter's life and work.

Mainiero, Lina, and Langdon Lynne Faust, eds. *American Women Writers*.

Vol. 3. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1981. This article presents a balanced survey of negative and positive views of Pollyanna.

Related Titles/Adaptations

The only legitimate sequel to Pollyanna is Eleanor Porter's *Pollyanna Grows Up*, in which Pollyanna moves to Boston and tries to spread the Glad Game throughout that metropolis. Boston, she finds, is a much more difficult place to spread her brand of joy than was the small town of Beldingsville, Vermont.

Many other Pollyanna tales have been published by other authors, such as Harriet Lummis Smith and Elizabeth Borton de Trevino, but these lack the freshness and force of Porter's original creation. Some of Porter's other works for young adults have certain similarities with the Pollyanna tales, but none of them place the same emphasis on optimism and gladness.

In 1960 Walt Disney released a motion picture version of *Pollyanna*, directed by David Swift and starring Hayley Mills and Jane Wyman. It received mixed reactions from young viewers; some enjoyed the eccentric characters, while others thought *Pollyanna* too goody goody. In 1989 NBC-TV produced a made-for-TV movie adaptation of *Pollyanna* entitled *Polly*. The movie stars Phylicia Rashad, Brandon Adams, Dorian Harewood, and Keshia Knight.



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