

Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm Short Guide

Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm by Kate Douglas Wiggin

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Overview

The primary appeal of *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* is its lively plot, which holds the attention of readers of all ages.

Young readers can identify with Rebecca Rowena Randall because she is not the completely perfect, idealized child of many early twentieth-century young adult novels. Sometimes irresponsible, Rebecca does not always follow Aunt Miranda's rules, and her excuses sound familiar to anyone who has ever been scolded for childhood misdemeanors.

Even when she tries to do the right thing, Rebecca makes mistakes, but her experiences demonstrate that most such errors can be corrected.

Further, Rebecca's example encourages readers to develop self-confidence. In both appearance and personality, Rebecca exemplifies the "ugly duckling." Initially the people of Riverboro consider her a strange-looking child whose imagination leads to distinctly odd behavior. Before the end of the novel, however, Rebecca's talents are recognized, and people begin to comment on how attractive she has become.

About the Author

Kate Douglas Smith Wiggin, the daughter of Helen E. Dyer and Robert Noah Smith, was born on September 28, 1856, in Philadelphia. Robert Smith died when Kate was three years old, and Helen Dyer Smith took her two daughters to Portland, Maine. Kate's mother married Dr. Albion Bradbury in 1863, and the family moved to the nearby town of Hollis, Maine, where they lived until 1873, when they moved to Santa Barbara, California. Wiggin finished her studies at Abbott Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, before joining her family several months later.

During her childhood, Wiggin enjoyed a chance encounter with Charles Dickens on a train trip between Portland and Boston. She described this meeting in *A Child's Journey with Dickens* and again in her autobiography, *My Garden of Memory*. Her schooldays at Gorham Female Seminary inspired her first published story, "Half a Dozen Housekeepers," accepted by *St. Nicholas* magazine in 1876.

In 1877 Wiggin became acquainted with the German educator Friedrich Froebel's concept of the kindergarten, and the next year she established the Silver Street Kindergarten in San Francisco, the first free kindergarten west of the Rocky Mountains. In 1880 she opened a training school for kindergarten teachers, including her younger sister Nora A. Smith, with whom she later wrote several books on educational theories and techniques. Wiggin's first two books, *The Birds' Christmas Carol* and *The Story of Patsy*, were privately published to raise money for the kindergarten project.

Wiggin continued her kindergarten work after she married Samuel Bradley Wiggin in 1881. Although they moved to New York in 1884, she returned to California each spring to supervise the kindergarten. In 1889, while Wiggin was in California, her husband died suddenly. Wiggin continued to live in New York until 1893, when she moved with her mother and her sister to Hollis, Maine.

After her husband's death, Wiggin made almost annual ocean voyages to Europe, and on one such voyage she met George C. Riggs, a New York businessman whom she married in 1895. Riggs's business interests required frequent trips to England, Scotland, Ireland, and Germany, and Wiggin traveled widely with him. She died on August 24, 1923, at Harrow-on-the-Hill, England.

Setting

Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm is set in Riverboro, Maine, a small town resembling Hollis, Maine, where Wiggin grew up. While Wiggin does not emphasize the time period, the novel appears to take place sometime around the 1870s, for one character's fiancé has been killed during the American Civil War.



Social Sensitivity

Although the Sawyers are relatively affluent, they consistently demonstrate an egalitarian attitude. Unlike the Smellie family, for example, the Sawyers never flaunt their wealth, nor are they condescending toward neighbors who have less. Both Rebecca and her wealthy friend Emma Jane associate as equals with the impoverished Simpsons, and Rebecca becomes extremely angry when Minnie Smellie taunts the Simpson children because their father is in jail.

Rebecca insists that the children should not be treated as thieves just because their father has been convicted of dealing in stolen property.

Furthermore, Rebecca demonstrates hospitality when she volunteers to entertain the foreign missionaries. Wiggin also notes that Rebecca hates gossip and refuses to listen to tales about others. In contrast, Minnie Smellie is condemned not only for her cruelty to those less fortunate, but also for her selfishness.

Literary Qualities

Although Wiggin lacked formal training as a novelist, she was an excellent storyteller. *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* is a series of entertaining stories about a young misfit who wants to live up to the expectations of her benefactors without sacrificing her individuality.

The episodic plot is always amusing.

Coincidence plays a role in the resolution of the plot but less so in this work than in most young adult novels of the same era.

The novel's greatest strength is Rebecca, a unique character among the many idealized young characters in early twentieth-century novels. Imaginative, unconventional, and sometimes irresponsible, Rebecca frequently makes mistakes, but her self-confidence and her individuality make her a leader among her peers and a favorite among young readers.

Wiggin shows more interest in developing her themes than in developing her characters, and with the exception of Rebecca, the characters tend to be stereotyped, and the motivations for their behavior at times seem unclear.

Aunt Miranda's lack of development is the most disturbing. For most of the novel, she appears virtually unmoved by Rebecca's efforts to please her, and her deathbed change of heart seems rather sudden. Aunt Jane's explanation for Miranda's attitudes may be an attempt to provide the necessary motivation.



Themes and Characters

In *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, Wiggin illustrates many of the principles she sets forth in her books on early childhood education. Foremost is encouragement of the imagination. From her father's family, Rebecca has inherited creativity, which eventually wins her the respect of her schoolmates, her teacher, the townspeople, and even Aunt Miranda. Likewise Rebecca's unusual interests for a young girl of her time emphasize the importance of individuality. Possessing the self-confidence to differ from her peers, she quickly becomes a leader at school. Above all, Rebecca demonstrates the winning force of good character. Despite her mistakes, Rebecca cares about others, and she tries to do the right thing. As a result, she not only wins honors at school but gains her mother's respect and Aunt Miranda's love.

The most completely developed character is the protagonist, Rebecca Rowena Randall. She first appears as Wiggin first imagined her, the lone passenger in a stagecoach headed for Riverboro. The author establishes both Rebecca's innocence and her individuality when she scandalizes her mother, Aurelia Sawyer Randall, by saying the word "nightgown" aloud in public. Perhaps intentionally, Wiggin leaves the description of Rebecca's physical appearance somewhat vague, mentioning that she is an unusual-looking child with long dark braids and fascinating eyes. Near the end of the novel, the grown-up Rebecca is described as strikingly attractive.

Rebecca's closest friend, Emma Jane Perkins, is Rebecca's complete opposite in personality and appearance. Idolizing Rebecca for her imagination and independence, Emma Jane remains her loyal follower, but this blonde, pretty, conventionally behaved friend seems to be overlooked whenever Rebecca is present.

Rebecca's aunts, Miranda and Jane Sawyer, have volunteered to raise one of their sister's daughters. Although Rebecca is not their first choice, Jane sympathizes with Rebecca immediately and, in defending her, finally finds the self-confidence to oppose Miranda's domination. Miranda considers Jane weak and softhearted, and takes pride in her own strength. The townspeople treat her with respect but secretly feel sorry for any young person forced to live by her rules. Only her sisters have seen Miranda's kind gestures; Jane assures Rebecca that Miranda is proud of her accomplishments, and Aurelia tells how Miranda once helped her dress to attend a ball with Lorenzo de Medici Randall, although Miranda had assumed that she herself was the object of his interest.

Rebecca's foremost opponent turns out to be her cruel schoolmate Minnie Smellie. Unlike Rebecca, Minnie lacks any sort of sensitivity or sympathy toward those less fortunate than herself.

While Rebecca befriends and tries to help out her needy neighbors, the Simpsons, Minnie hurls taunts at the family.

Jeremiah and Sarah Cobb, the Sawyers' kindhearted neighbors, provide help, good advice, and a haven for Rebecca. In turn, she more or less replaces their only child, a



girl who died in infancy. Jeremiah, a stagecoach driver, brings Rebecca to Riverboro and becomes her first friend in town. She turns to him when life with Aunt Miranda becomes unbearable. Sarah repairs clothes that Rebecca carelessly damages and generally mothers the lonely child.

Later the Cobbs share proudly in her accomplishments.

Adam Ladd, a wealthy but unhappy young entrepreneur, becomes Rebecca's benefactor when he buys enough soap from Rebecca and Emma Jane for the girls to buy a lamp for the Simpsons.

Attracted to Rebecca's personality, he guides her intellectual development, both by the books he gives her and by the direction he gives her teachers. Although he claims to fear young ladies, there are hints at the end of the novel that Adam will eventually court Rebecca.



Topics for Discussion

1. Miranda Sawyer, Jane Sawyer, and Aurelia Randall are sisters, but they do not act very much alike. In what ways are their personality differences indicated? Why are they so different? Are there any similarities among them?
2. Rebecca and Emma Jane sell soap so that the Simpson family can have a new lamp for Christmas. Is their experience anything like selling Girl Scout cookies today? Do their prospective customers react in the same way?
3. In some ways, Jeremiah Cobb serves as the father Rebecca does not have. In what ways does he help Rebecca?
4. Adam Ladd is one of Rebecca's best friends. Some critics have suggested that when Rebecca grows up, she will marry him. Is their relationship really a romance?
5. Rebecca's foremost opponent is a schoolmate named Minnie Smellie.
What impression of her personality does her name convey?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Both Kate Douglas Wiggin and her character Rebecca attended small-town schools in mid-nineteenth-century Maine. Was Rebecca's school typical of most schools at that time? How did those schools differ from schools today?

2. Rebecca Rowena Randall was named for the two heroines of Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. In what ways does she resemble each of these heroines?

3. The orphaned or fatherless young girl who wins the affection of a coldhearted relative or guardian appears frequently in novels of the early 1900s.

Compare Rebecca with another such heroine, perhaps Anne Shirley of Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) or Elnora Comstock of Gene Stratton Porter's *A Girl of the Limberlost* (1909).

4. Rebecca's best friend is Emma Jane.

How is Emma Jane different from her?

Why does Wiggin make the two girls so different? Why are they friends?

5. Rebecca gradually wins the heart of Aunt Miranda. What are the steps in this process?

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Related Titles/Adaptations

New Chronicles of Rebecca contains additional stories about Rebecca, set during the same period as Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm and involving many of the same characters, but it never achieved the same popularity as Wiggin's first work about Rebecca.

Readers should note that the 1938 film Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, starring Shirley Temple, has no relationship to Wiggin's novel other than its title.



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996