

Sarah, Plain and Tall Study Guide

Sarah, Plain and Tall by Patricia MacLachlan

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Overview

Sarah, Plain and Tall is a simple story of a family that needs a mother and of the woman who gradually fills this need.

It is not a tale of wild action or frightful events. Instead, it emphasizes the humanity of characters who yearn to be loved but fear they may be unworthy of love. The novella focuses on honest emotion and portrays characters attempting to cope with complex feelings.

Sarah, Plain and Tall is popular with young readers, who enjoy its vivid recreation of a different era and appreciate MacLachlan's understanding of the universal emotional needs of young people.

About the Author

Born in 1945 in Cheyenne, Wyoming, Patricia MacLachlan grew up as an only child whose parents encouraged her interest in reading and writing. MacLachlan graduated from the University of Connecticut and in 1962 married Robert MacLachlan, with whom she has two sons and a daughter. The family lives in Leeds, Massachusetts.

During the 1980s, MacLachlan has enjoyed much success as a writer. Her first novel, *Arthur, for the Very First Time*, won the Golden Kite Award from the Society of Children's Book Writers in 1980. *Unclaimed Treasures* was a 1984 Boston Globe-Horn Book Award honor book, and in 1986 *Sarah, Plain and Tall* won the Newbery Medal. The latter book was inspired by a trip to the North Dakota farm where MacLachlan's father was born and by a true story told to MacLachlan by her mother.



Plot Summary

Sarah, Plain and Tall is a heartwarming tale of a family in search of a mother. Anna and Caleb are two motherless children, who live all alone with their father in an isolated, rural community in turn of the century America. Life is difficult on the farm for the three lonely family members. The nearest neighbors are a half-day's drive from the farm by wagon, and although it's been several years since Papa was widowed, there are no eligible women in the area for him to meet. Little Caleb, in particular, needs a mother. Mama died after giving birth to Caleb, and he has never known the love of a mother. This loss tears at Anna's heart every time Caleb asks her what life was like when Mama was alive.

One day, Papa announces to his children that he has placed an ad in the paper for a new wife and mother. What's more, he has received a reply from a lady named Sarah Elisabeth Wheaton. Sarah lives by the seashore in Maine, and although Sarah loves her home, her brother has just married a nice, young lady, and Sarah wishes to move out and find a home of her own so her brother and his wife can enjoy their new life together. Papa, Anna, and Caleb each write Sarah a letter, hoping to learn more about her. Sarah sends them all a nice reply, and even encloses a book about sea birds so they can learn more about where she currently lives.

Little Caleb reads the books so many times he memorizes it by heart. He carries Sarah's letter everywhere he goes, and Anna begins to worry that Caleb will be terribly disappointed if Sarah decides not to become their new mother. Caleb's hopes shoot sky high when Sarah writes to inform them that she is coming for a month-long visit in the spring. If things go well, Papa tells the children, he and Sarah will be married in the summertime. Sarah arrives by train, as planned. Papa brings her from the train station back to the farm, and the family begins to get to know Sarah.

Sarah, as she described herself in her letter, is plain and tall. She loves to sing, and on the very first night, she has Papa singing again for the first time since Mama died. The family dogs instantly fall in love with Sarah. Caleb quickly becomes attached to Sarah, too. He follows her everywhere, telling her all about himself, their family, and life on the farm. Papa and Anna also come to love Sarah, but Anna is shy like her father, and they are not as open about their feelings as Caleb. The more Caleb comes to love Sarah, the more frightened he becomes that she will decide not to stay with the family. Sarah seems to care about them all, but the children can tell she is homesick, and misses the sea. Anna and Caleb wish that they lived by the sea instead of in a vast prairie. They try everything they can think of to make Sarah like their new home, but no matter what they do, she still misses the sea.

One day, the neighbors from the south, Matthew and Maggie, come to visit the family. Matthew, like Papa, had placed an ad in the papers seeking a wife, and Maggie had come all the way from Tennessee to marry him. She has brought the laughter and joy back into the lives of Matthew and his two young children. Maggie helps Sarah feel at home by bringing her flowers for planting a garden. Maggie explains to Sarah that



although Maggie misses her old home in Tennessee, she is happy with her new home and family. Maggie suggests that Sarah drive the wagon to Maggie's house for visits. The next day, Sarah insists that Papa teach her how to drive the wagon so that she can come and go as she pleases. Caleb doesn't want Papa to teach her, for he is afraid that Sarah will leave and never come back. Sarah learns quickly, and insists on driving away by herself the next day.

It is a very long day for Caleb, Anna, and Papa. Anna and Caleb cry over the idea of never seeing Sarah again. Caleb, especially, is certain that she will not return, because she misses the sea too much. The entire family is overjoyed when Sarah returns to them that evening, as night falls. In town, she has bought colored pencils of gray, green, and blue, so that she can draw pictures with the colors of the ocean. That night, she tells them she has decided to stay and join their family. She and Papa will be married in the summer. The whole family rejoices, and Caleb learns a valuable lesson: Love cannot be forced, only accepted. Gladly, he accepts his new Mama's love.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Young Caleb asks his older sister, Anna, what life was like when Mama was alive. For the hundredth time, Anna tells him that Mama used to sing around the house, and so did Papa. Caleb remarks that Papa doesn't sing anymore. Caleb asks Anna what he looked like when he was born, and she tells him that Mama thought he was beautiful. Anna, who loves her little brother, doesn't tell him that she hadn't liked him, at first, because their Mama had died after giving birth to Caleb. It had taken Anna three whole days to love Caleb. In the end, his tiny smile had won her over. Caleb begs Anna to remember the songs Mama used to sing, so that he might have a way to remember her. Tears spring to Anna's eyes, but before they can fall, Papa enters and wraps his children in a hug.

That night, at dinner, Caleb asks Papa why he doesn't sing anymore. It is not meant as an accusation, but the words sound harsh. Papa says he's forgotten the old songs, but he adds that he may have a way to remember them. Papa announces to his family that he has placed an advertisement in the newspapers for a new wife, and has received a response from a woman named Sarah Elisabeth Wheaton. Like Maggie, explains Papa, referring to Matthew's new wife. Matthew is their neighbor, and he, too, had placed an ad in the paper for a wife. Matthew married Maggie, who came all the way from Tennessee. Now, his house is filled with laughter. Papa reads for Anna and Caleb the letter he has received from Sarah, who lives in Maine. In the letter, she explains that her brother William is about to be married, and so Sarah needs to find a home and family of her own now. She tells Papa that she is a hard worker, loves the sea, has a cat, but, she warns him, she is not mild mannered. When Papa finishes reading, a long silence settles over the kitchen table. Finally Anna speaks. "Ask her if she sings," she says (pg. 10).

Chapter 1 Analysis

The author does not tell the reader in what time period the book is set, but there are several clues in Chapter 1 from which the reader can detect that the story is set in late 1800s or early 1900s America. The most important clue is the ad Papa has placed an ad in the paper for a wife. This type of advertising was quite common in America's early days. As the populace pushed further west, building homes and taming the land along the way, eligible spouses were often in short supply. Especially in rural farming communities like the one in the book, the populace was so spread out that a man might live more than two hundred miles from the nearest eligible woman. Meanwhile, there were women in distant communities with no eligible males. Thus, potential mates often advertised in the papers. The newspapers served as a way of bridging the distance between men and women hoping to find a partner in life.



Although this first chapter is brief, the reader can already understand Papa's desire to find a new wife. His first wife, the children's mother, died tragically from complications of childbirth. Caleb was only one-day-old when his Mama died, but Anna is old enough to remember her well. When Caleb was born, Anna resented him at first, blaming the innocent baby for her mother's death. However, Anna quickly overcomes her resentment when she realizes that Caleb, at his tender age, needs their Mama even more than she does. By the time the book opens, Caleb has lived all of his years without a mother, and his need for a maternal figure is great indeed. Anna demonstrates her maturity by not telling Caleb how she felt about him at first. After all, Anna has recognized that she was wrong to blame Caleb for Mama's death, and doesn't wish to hurt him by telling him that she ever felt that way. Young as she is, Anna has attempted to be a mother-figure for little Caleb, although she is still young enough to need mothering herself. Papa can no longer ignore his children's needs, or his own. When Mama died, all the joy had gone from Papa's life, and now, several years later, he is ready to find happiness again.

In Chapter 1, the author, Patricia MacLachlan, begins to develop one of her primary themes, loss, and she uses symbolism to establish this theme. The pain of losing Mama has not subsided for the children, although several years have passed since her death. The fact that Papa doesn't sing anymore conveys the lack of joy in his existence. Little Caleb, whose birth coincided with Mama's death, has never heard Papa sing. Caleb pleads for his sister to teach him the old songs, but neither Anna nor Papa is capable of remembering the words. Thus, song is established as symbolism for happiness, and the lack of singing in the household indicates the sadness that has permeated this family's life since Mama died. Papa and Anna's inability to recall the old songs indicates that these two characters do not even remember what it was like to be happy.

MacLachlan uses the natural symbolism of weather and the seasons to foreshadow a change in the family's emotional weather, however, indicating to the reader that there is new hope for familial happiness. As the story opens, the ice and snow of winter is gradually giving way to the rebirth of spring. Young Anna likens the dark days of winter to the unhappiness she felt immediately after Mama's death. Thus, the arrival of Sarah's letter and the beginning of the spring thaw become linked in the reader's mind with the rebirth of hope.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Anna, Caleb and Papa each write a reply to Sarah's letter. Sarah's response to Anna's letter arrives first. In it, Sarah assures Anna that she can, indeed, braid hair and cook, although she prefers carpentry and painting. Sarah states that her favorite colors are blue, gray, and green, the colors of the sea. She tells Anna that her brother, William, is a fisherman, and encloses for Anna a book of sea birds. Caleb reads the book about the sea birds many times. He worries out loud that Sarah won't like him and his family. Soon, his letter arrives, however. Sarah tells him her cat is named Seal, and that Seal does like dogs. She tells Caleb his home sounds lovely, and promises that she does know how to keep a fire going at night. Caleb takes to reading this letter over and over, carrying it with him everywhere.

One morning, as the family of three cleans out the horse stalls, Papa advises Anna and Caleb that he has received his reply from Sarah, too. Sarah has offered to come and visit for a month, if they would like. Caleb and Anna both say "yes," and they all get back to work with big smiles on their faces. Papa posts his reply letter the very next day. Over the next few days, as the family waits for a reply, Anna catches herself setting out four places for supper. Finally, Sarah's letter arrives. In it, she announces that she will come by train. They will recognize her by her yellow bonnet. She tells them she is plain and tall. At the bottom of the letter, Sarah has added a postscript for Papa: "*Tell them I sing.*"

Chapter 2 Analysis

By the contents of his letter to Sarah, the reader can already tell that Caleb has the most at stake in this potential new relationship. Caleb wants a mother so badly that he is afraid to get his hopes up. For this reason, Caleb mentions everything he can think of in his letter that Sarah might not like. He tells her the house is small, and that they have dogs that might not get along with her cat. By doing this, Caleb is showing the reader that he doesn't want to begin to love his new mother until he is absolutely sure that she will not leave him like his real mother did. When Sarah replies with a friendly letter and reassurances that her cat does like dogs, Caleb allows himself to get attached to the possibility that Sarah might become his new mother. He demonstrates his hope by carrying her letters around and reading them over and over. Papa and Anna are equally hopeful, but they hide their emotions better. Thus, Caleb is the heart and soul of the house. He speaks for the others, and he is the only one willing to show how much Sarah's visit means to him.

Sarah's postscript to Jacob, announcing that she does indeed sing, ties into the author's symbolic use of song. Sarah seems to understand the importance of singing, and the happiness it implies. When Papa reads the postscript, his reaction is to smile, something he has done infrequently since Mama's death. MacLachlan introduces



another piece of symbolism in this chapter when Anna sets four places at the table. Although Anna knows perfectly well that Sarah will not be coming to visit for several weeks, the fact that she lays out a fourth place setting indicates to the reader that Anna wants to give Sarah a place at the table, and ultimately, hopefully, a place in her heart, as well.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Sarah arrives in the spring. The fields are in bloom with red and orange, blue-eyed grass, and Indian paintbrush. The morning of her arrival, Papa dresses carefully. He saddles up the two horses, Old Bess and wild-eyed Jack, and then heads off down the dirt road toward the train station. Caleb and Anna do their chores silently. Finally Caleb breaks the silence with questions. He asks Anna if he looks all right, if she thinks Sarah will be nice, if Sarah will like them, and if she will bring the sea. Anna says yes to everything except for Sarah bringing the sea; it can't be done, she explains to Caleb. Nervously they watch the road until finally they see Papa's wagon returning to the house. Caleb is excited to spot a yellow bonnet through the cloud of dust that surrounds the wagon.

Sarah alights from the wagon. She is indeed plain and tall. She introduces her cat, Seal, to the family's two dogs, Nick and Lottie. The animals get along well immediately. Papa remarks that the cat will be good for catching mice in the barn. With a smile, Sarah replies that Seal will be good in the house, too. In her large, rough hands she holds gifts for Caleb and Anna, from the sea. To Caleb she gives a moon snail, and to Anna, a sea stone. Caleb tells Sarah that there is no sea here. Anna notices the look on Sarah's face when she talks of the sea; it is a sad and lonely look. Anna worries as Papa takes Sarah inside and shows her to her room. Caleb wants to know when they will all sing together. Anna only shakes her head.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The author continues to reinforce her use of nature's symbolism in this chapter. Sarah's arrival coincides with springtime. The fields are beginning to bloom with flowers, and the reader begins to hope that love and happiness will bloom anew in the household of this family that has lived for so long in a frozen, emotional winter. However, love, like the spring flowers, takes time to bloom. The author maintains suspense in this chapter with her brief introduction of Sarah's character. Sarah, like the spring, has newly arrived, and it is anyone's guess whether she will flourish in this new land, so far from her seaside home. Caleb voices this uncertainty by asking his sister when they will sing. Anna cannot answer him. It is too soon to say whether Sarah will teach them to be happy, and whether she will teach them to sing.

Again in this chapter, Caleb speaks for the rest of his family. Aloud, he worries whether Sarah will like the house, and most importantly, if she will like them. Papa and Anna are too mature to voice these fears aloud, but Papa gives away his own feelings by all the time and extra care he lavishes on his appearance before going to pick up Sarah. The fields are abloom with flowers this time of year, but Anna and Caleb worry that there is no sea near their house for Sarah. Already they have begun to worry that Sarah will be



unhappy living away from the sea, a worry which continues to grow until the very last chapter. This is a legitimate worry, as Sarah obviously loves the seaside where she lives. However it serves primarily as emotional protection for the children. It is too painful for Anna and Caleb to contemplate that Sarah might not like them for who they are. It is easier, although still painful, for them to consider the possibility that Sarah might not choose to stay because she misses the sea. Thus, even as the children get their hopes up, they are already protecting themselves emotionally by pinning all of their worries on whether or not Sarah will miss the ocean.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The dogs are the first to fall in love with Sarah. They sleep in her bed every night. On the windowsill in her room, Sarah sets up a collection of seashells. She shows them one by one to Caleb, explaining that the conch shell allows one to hear the sound of the sea. Caleb hopes it will be enough for Sarah to hear the sea, but Anna notices how sad Sarah looks as she listens to the ocean. Anna and Papa are both quiet and shy around Sarah, but Caleb talks to her all day long. When Sarah says she is going to pick some flowers to dry for wintertime, Caleb tells Anna it means she's staying, since she's talking about winter. Both children accompany Sarah to pick the flowers. Anna hints that the roses will be in bloom by summer. Summertime is when the wedding will be, if Sarah decides to marry Papa.

That night, the family eats Sarah's stew and Papa's bread, and Sarah teaches them how people say "yes" in Maine; the word is "ayuh." After dinner, she cuts Caleb's and Papa's hair. She throws Caleb's hair into the wind for the birds to use as nest lining. Later that evening, Anna catches Papa out behind the barn, tossing his own hair into the wind for the birds. As for Anna's hair, Sarah brushes it out and ties it back with a rose velvet ribbon. They stand side by side in the mirror; Anna thinks she looks like Sarah's daughter. Afterwards, Sarah leads the family in singing. Sarah tells them her plans for the next day include seeing the sheep. She has touched seals before, but never a sheep. Caleb wishes he could touch a seal. His comment provokes a homesick look in Sarah's eyes. She sighs, but then begins to sing again.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Anna and Papa are both shy and reserved around Sarah, so it is once again up to young Caleb to express the family's enthusiasm for her presence. Sarah has brought new life into the household with her seashells, flowers and velvet ribbons. This is most likely the first feminine attention Anna's hair has received since her mother's death, as it is typically the mother-figure who first teaches a young girl how to make her hair look pretty. Sarah has also turned her attention to the men's grooming by cutting Papa and Caleb's hair. Her thoughtful nature is evident in the way she throws Caleb's hair cuttings into the wind for the birds to use in their nests. Papa, who like Anna is shy about speaking his feelings, shows that he is interested in Sarah and the things she does, when he decides to secretly throw his own hair into the wind for the birds.

Unfortunately, the more they get to like Sarah, the more nervous the family members get that Sarah might decide not to stay after all. Caleb and Anna take to watching Sarah's every facial expression as they try to gauge how she's feeling. Each time they notice a homesick or sad look on her face, the children grow morose. Having lost their



mother once, they are afraid to love Sarah, unless they can be sure she will stay and care for them.

The author underscores this uncertain emotional climate through the use of natural symbolism. Sarah's seashell collection symbolizes her former home by the sea. The seashells fascinate Caleb, but he also considers them a rival for Sarah's affection. As they symbolize her love of the sea and of her old home, he fears that this love will prevent her from growing to love his family, and their land-locked home. The local flora gains symbolic importance in this chapter, as well. Anna equates the summer roses with the summer wedding, and this symbolism will be carried through the next several chapters by the author. If all goes well in the coming month, love may bloom along with the roses of summer. The song that Sarah chooses to sing reinforces the importance of summertime to this budding relationship.

The entire family is looking towards the summer as the time when the roses and the relationship will have matured. Thus, Sarah's choice to sing a song about the arrival of summer represents hope for the family that happiness, music and summertime are all on their way.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Sarah quickly befriends the sheep, even naming the lambs after her three favorite aunts in Maine, Harriet, Mattie and Lou. When they find a dead lamb in the field, Sarah keeps Anna and Caleb away, and shakes off the turkey buzzards with her gesturing fist. She guards the body until Papa arrives to bury it and take Sarah back to the house. After dinner that night, she draws pictures of the family to send home to Maine. She draws the rolling fields, with a sheep and a windmill. It makes her think of the sand dunes on the beach in Maine. She and her brother had a sand dune all their own, which they used to slide down into the water. Caleb morosely comments that there are no sand dunes here, but Papa says there are.

Papa leads them out to the barn, where he places a ladder next to the big mound of hay he keeps to bed the horses down with. Sarah, Anna, and Caleb all take turns sliding down the hay dune, and even Papa joins in at the end. Later in the kitchen, Sarah draws warm portraits of Papa and Caleb sliding down the dune, and one of Anna with her long hair wet from the tub. She looks again at the drawing of the fields she started earlier. Thoughtfully, she tells Caleb that something is missing from the drawing.

Chapter 5 Analysis

In this chapter, Papa takes some definitive actions to woo Sarah. She displays a soft, loving heart when the lamb dies, and she guards its body for proper burial as one would give a pet. Farm animals are not always treated like pets, and had it not been for Sarah, Papa might have left the lamb's body to the turkey buzzards instead of burying it. By burying the lamb, Papa is showing Sarah that her feelings are important to him. He treats the lamb as if it were an honored pet, because that is how Sarah feels about it. Papa's next thoughtful move is to create a hay dune for Sarah. Sliding down a pile of hay is hardly the same as sliding down the sand into the big, blue sea, but Sarah's heart is touched, because she sees Papa making an effort to make her feel more at home.

Sarah's pictures are important, because they reflect the way she sees things. Her first attempt to draw the fields is not quite right. Sarah says that something is missing, and the children are smart enough to understand what she means by that. It's not just that Sarah has forgotten to draw some particular element in the drawing. It means that the picture Sarah sees when she looks at their life is incomplete. However, after Papa's thoughtful creation of the hay dune, Sarah returns to the kitchen and easily dashes off several warm and fun pictures of Papa, Caleb and Anna. Although the reader will later learn that the missing element is the color of the sea, in this chapter it becomes clear that what Sarah is actually missing is a sense of warmth and belonging. After Papa makes her feel at home with his hay dune idea, Sarah's pictures immediately take on a greater sense of warmth than her first attempt at drawing.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

As the days grow longer, Papa teaches Sarah how to plow the fields. Afterwards, Sarah asks the children to tell her about wintertime. Caleb explains that they go to school in the winter, and Sarah volunteers to help with their homework. They talk about snow, and how Papa ties a rope from the barn to the house to prevent anyone from getting lost in a blizzard. Anna frowns; she loves winter and doesn't want Caleb scaring off Sarah with stories of blizzards. Anna talks about the pretty frost on the windows, the warm fireplace, and snow days off school when they like to make snow angels. Sarah says it's hot, and she can't wait for winter to cool down. She invites the children swimming. Both children protest that they can't swim, and so Sarah insists on teaching them.

Against Anna's protests that the cow pond is for cows, Sarah dives right into the water, laughing. She teaches Caleb how to float, and tries to teach Anna, but Anna merely sinks to the bottom. Caleb asks Sarah if the pond is like the sea. Sarah explains that the sea is salt water, and that there are waves as far as the eye can see. Caleb makes a wave for Sarah in the pond and Anna finally figures out how to float successfully. That night, Anna dreams that the fields have turned into an ocean, and that Sarah is happy.

Chapter 6 Analysis

By asking about their life during the winter, Sarah is showing the first inklings of a desire to stay with the family. Caleb has grown very attached to Sarah, and his fear of losing her is even more pronounced than before. Just as he did when he first wrote her, he now tells her all the negative sides to winter on the farm. Caleb does this to make absolutely sure Sarah knows what she is getting herself into, so that she won't decide to stay and then back out later, because the winters are too harsh. His approach irritates his sister, however, who is intent on selling Sarah on the idea of living with them. Anna only wants Sarah to know about the good things in their lives, and so when she speaks of winter, she avoids talk of the brutal cold and harsh blizzards, preferring to tell Sarah about the beauty of winter and how much fun they can have.

Sarah demonstrates her desire to make the best of things when she insists on teaching the children to swim. Although Anna protests that the cow pond is only for cows, for Sarah, it represents her love of the water, which she wishes to share with the children. Sarah takes to the water happily, although Caleb and Anna still worry that their little cow pond won't be enough to satisfy her after years of living by the wide, blue sea.

Again in Chapter 6, the author relies heavily on nature to represent the growing love between Sarah and her would-be family. The natural setting of the farm provides a strong contrast against the natural environment of the seashore. This contrast highlights the difficulty of the decision that Sarah must shortly make. The cow pond is a far cry



from the deep, blue sea, and yet, Sarah finds that her love of the water is large enough to encompass even this tiny pond. Her ability to adjust to the smaller body of water signifies hope that she will be able to adjust to her new surroundings as well. Winter in this chapter takes on a happier meaning than in previous chapters, where it symbolized the frozen land of grief and loss. When Sarah asks about winter, she is actually asking what the future will hold for her if she stays with the family. Thus, the talk of winter in Chapter 6 is a discussion filled with hope and optimism, rather than sadness and loss.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

The neighbors, Matthew and Maggie, arrive to help Papa plow his corn. Sarah, Anna and Caleb stand on the porch, watching the wagon arrive with Matthew and Maggie. Anna remembers the last time she and Caleb had stood watching for the wagon to arrive, the day Sarah came to visit. Today, Sarah's hair is piled high in a thick braid, and dotted with the wild daisies, which Papa has picked for her. Matthew and Maggie give Sarah a gift of several live chickens, for eating, explains Maggie. Anna suspects Sarah will keep them as pets instead, and her suspicion is confirmed when Sarah names the chickens. Matthew and Maggie have two young children, named Rose and Violet, who play with the chickens and the dogs. Seal, the cat, is hiding out in the barn, where the temperature is coolest.

As the men begin plowing, Sarah and Maggie sit together at the table. Maggie asks if Sarah is lonely. Sarah's eyes fill with tears. Understanding, Maggie takes her hand and tells Sarah she, too, misses her home in Tennessee sometimes. Sarah admits to missing the sea, and her brother, William. Sarah explains that William is married now, and his wife is now mistress of his house. Maggie tells Sarah that no matter where one is, there is always something to miss. Maggie gives Sarah another present, plants for the garden. Sarah smiles, remembering her garden in Maine. She wonders if the flowers she used to plant in Maine will grow in this climate. Maggie insists that she must try. Maggie suggests that Sarah drive the wagon over to Maggie's house to visit sometime. Sarah says she doesn't know how to drive a wagon, but Maggie, Anna and Caleb all offer to teach her. At dinner that night, Matthew tells Sarah how glad they all are that she has come. Maggie will now have a new friend, he says. Sarah smiles across the table at Maggie. After the neighbors leave that night, Papa brings Sarah the first roses of summer.

Chapter 7 Analysis

In this chapter, Sarah finds a friend who can understand the way she feels. Maggie, too, misses her home, but Maggie has come to love her new home and family. She shares this feeling with Sarah, and shows Sarah that it is possible to find happiness in a new home far away from where one began in life. Maggie philosophically suggests to Sarah that no matter where one is, one can always find something to miss. This is a rather delicate way of telling Sarah to appreciate what she has before her instead of looking back to the past with sadness. Having been through the homesickness Sarah is experiencing, Maggie knows just what will make Sarah feel better. Her gift of plants for Sarah to start a garden in her new home, speaks to Sarah's need to put down roots. Over dinner, when Sarah echoes Maggie's words about how no matter where one is, there's always something to miss, it becomes clear to the reader that Maggie has been helpful in convincing Sarah to stay and put down new roots.



Maggie's advice could not have come at a more valuable time. After Maggie and her husband leave, Papa brings Sarah the first rose blooms of summer. These roses signify that the time to make a decision about the wedding is drawing very near. Thanks to Maggie's visit, Sarah has now had a chance to express her doubts and explore possible solutions to make herself feel good about choosing to stay. Maggie's suggestion that Sarah drive the wagon to visit her gives Sarah the idea that she can have more independence if she can convince Papa to let her use the wagon. For a woman like Sarah, who knows her own mind, such independence is vital to her happiness. Papa's response to this request will be important to Sarah in making her decision. If he says "no," Sarah will feel like a prisoner in her own home, and much less inclined to stay.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The next morning, Sarah puts on Papa's overalls and goes to confront him in the barn. Caleb tags along, explaining to Sarah that women don't wear overalls. "'This woman does,' said Sarah crisply" (pg. 44). In the barn, she firmly announces her intention to learn to ride a horse, and to drive the wagon by herself. She feeds the horses as she speaks. Papa tells Sarah she can learn to ride on Old Bess, but that Jack is too sly. To her request to learn to drive the wagon, he also accedes. She asks if they can start today, but Papa explains that he must fix the roof on the house, because a storm is coming. Tomorrow, he will begin teaching her to ride. Sarah makes one more firm decision. They will fix the roof together. Sarah reminds him that she is a good carpenter. Thunder sounds in the distance, and Papa asks her if she is fast, too. Sarah insists she is, and together they climb up to the roof.

Inside, the children listen to the sound of hammering on the roof. Caleb worries about why Sarah wants to learn to drive the wagon by herself. He is afraid she wants to leave them. Just then, Papa calls their names urgently. The children run outside to find a squall brewing. Papa tells Caleb and Anna to bring the cows, horses, and sheep into the barn, and quickly. Once all the animals and people are safe in the barn, the rain begins. Sarah suddenly remembers her chickens, and goes running out of the barn. Papa runs after her into the now-pouring rain. A few minutes later, Papa and Sarah return, their clothes drenched to the skin. Papa carries the chickens, and Sarah carries some of the summer roses that she rescued from the storm.

Everyone settles into the barn to wait out the storm. Sarah unpacks a bag filled with cheese, bread and jam while Papa spreads out blankets for them. Caleb asks Sarah what color the sea is when it storms. Blue, green and gray, she answers. Caleb smiles and points to the window, where they can see the squall raging outside. Sarah assures Papa that they have squalls in Maine, too, and that everything will be all right. In response, Papa puts an arm around her and rests his chin in her hair. Staring at them, Anna can remember when her father used to stand that way with her mother. The family takes refuge in the barn overnight. In the morning, when they emerge, hail covers the ground, making it gleam, thinks Anna, just like the ocean.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Expecting an argument, Sarah works herself up to defend her position when she asks Papa to teach her to ride a horse and drive the wagon. Papa's first response is concern that Sarah's favorite horse, Jack, will be too wild for a beginner to handle. Sarah interprets his concern as an attempt to dissuade her from her position, as perhaps it is. Papa may share Caleb's fear that if Sarah has the ability to leave them, she will. However, Papa is a grown man and obviously far more mature than Caleb. He realizes



that people cannot be forced to stay; they must choose it. Papa realizes that Sarah's request is fair, and agrees to grant it after only a moment's hesitation. His ability to negotiate fairly with Sarah further impresses her. However, Sarah is not through setting the terms of her decision to stay. By insisting to Papa that she help him fix the roof, she is standing up for her skills and abilities. Sarah is not the type of woman who likes to be treated like less than an equal. When Papa agrees to accept her help, she is gratified. Papa, too, begins to see what a valuable ally a strong woman, such as Sarah, would be as a wife.

The storm helps put everything in perspective for Sarah. When the squall threatens the family's house, Sarah has only moments to decide what is important enough to save. By choosing to save the summer roses, Sarah betrays how important the upcoming wedding has become to her. The roses were first brought to her attention by Anna, who hints in Chapter 4 that the roses will bloom in time for the wedding. Thus, the author uses the symbolism of the roses, previously established as representing the summer wedding, to reveal Sarah's heart to the reader.

This symbolism, in juxtaposition with the storm, shows both the hope and the fear currently residing in the hearts of the children. The squall rages outside as fear rages within these two children who have come to love Sarah so much that the thought of losing her is devastating. Yet, Sarah and Papa, together, repair the roof and keep the children safe from the storm. This budding togetherness, highlighted by the closeness the two adults demonstrate in the barn, foreshadows the emotional shelter from life's storms which Jacob and Sarah, together as a team, will be able to provide for the children.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

When they come out of the barn, they look around to see how much damage the storm has done. The wild summer roses lie scattered around the ground. Sarah is grateful to have saved an armful. Only one of Papa's fields is badly damaged. He and Sarah spend the next two days plowing and replanting it. The repairs he and Sarah made to the roof of the house held even through the storm. When the plowing is done, Papa keeps his promise to Sarah. He takes her out into the fields and teaches her to ride Old Bess. Sarah learns quickly, to Caleb's dismay. Caleb is afraid of Sarah's desire to go off alone. He is still afraid she will leave them. He thinks of ways to make her stay, including faking an illness and tying her up. Anna tells him no, but when he begins to cry, she cries, too. With tears in their eyes, the children watch Sarah learn to drive the wagon.

The next morning, Sarah is up early and dresses for town in a blue dress and her yellow bonnet. Papa gives her some last minute instructions about handling the horses, and suggests it is safest to be home before dark. Sarah kisses them all, even Papa to his surprise, and then she takes up the reins. Papa watches her drive away, admiring her driving. Caleb and Anna watch from the porch. Anna can't help but remember the day a wagon had come to take away her Mama; it had been a day just like today. Caleb does his chores badly, thinking of all the reasons why Sarah might want to leave them. Wearily, he tells Anna what is missing from Sarah's drawing of the fields. The colors of the sea are missing from the drawing and from the fields.

At Caleb's urging, Anna finally asks Papa what Sarah has gone to do in town. Papa admits he doesn't know, explaining that Sarah does things her own way. Caleb wants Anna to ask Papa if Sarah is coming back, but Anna is afraid to hear what the answer might be.

That evening, Anna sets the table with four plates. She, Papa and Caleb watch the sun start to go down over the fields. It is dusk, and soon it will be full dark. Caleb waits anxiously on the front porch, turning his moon snail over and over in his hands. Suddenly, the dogs begin to bark. Caleb cries out that he can see dust and a yellow bonnet approaching on the road. As Papa helps Sarah down from the wagon, Caleb bursts into tears.

As Sarah wraps him in a hug, he cries that Seal was very worried. Anna explains that they had been worried Sarah would leave them to return to her beloved sea. Sarah smiles and tells Anna that although she will always miss her old home, if she left Anna, Caleb, and Papa, she would miss them even more. Sarah hands them a package. Inside are three colored pencils: blue, gray, and green. Caleb grins and calls for his Papa to come see how Sarah has brought the sea. That night, they eat by the light of the candles Sarah has brought from town. Sarah and Papa have decided to marry.



Papa tells them over dinner that when the preacher asks him if he will take Sarah as his wife, he intends to answer, "Ayuh."

Chapter 9 Analysis

In this last chapter, Sarah finally comes to her decision. Intent on showing to her new family that she is a grown woman with a mind of her own, capable of taking care of herself, Sarah informs no one of her reasons for wishing to visit the town by herself. Although by keeping them in the dark, she frightens the children, it is still necessary for Sarah to display her independence in this way. They do not realize it, but she is teaching them to treat her with respect. By insisting on some personal freedom at this point, Sarah is testing the waters to make sure she will not regret her decision to stay. Papa, perhaps, understands this; however as the story is told through Anna's eyes, the reader is not privy to his thoughts.

Because of Sarah's behavior, Caleb learns a valuable life lesson. He has come to love Sarah, and the thought of losing her is so painful he is tempted to physically prevent her from leaving. What he learns, from the more mature reactions of his older sister and his father, is that Sarah cannot be forced to stay and love him. When she decides to stay and love him of her own accord, Caleb experiences the pure joy that comes when the risk of loving someone pays off.

The author makes use of recurring symbolism from previous chapters to neatly wrap up all the emotional loose ends in the story. In Chapter 5, the author had used Sarah's drawings as a window into Sarah's mindset. When Sarah announces in that earlier chapter that something is missing from her landscape drawing of the fields, little Caleb is quick to understand that Sarah feels incomplete with their family. Without the colors of the sea, Sarah's life lacks warmth. However, Sarah has found such warmth in the bosom of her new family that she no longer needs her old home. By bringing the colors of the sea back from town, in the form of blue, gray, and green colored pencils, Sarah is declaring that what had previously been an incomplete picture is now complete. She feels whole and happy with her new family, and the children understand her symbolic gesture perfectly.

Author MacLachlan fills in the details by bringing back the symbolism of the place settings as well. Anna prepares four places at the table in a gesture of hope that Sarah will return to take her rightful place with the family. The final piece of symbolism used by the author is perhaps the most emotionally powerful. Sarah's return -- along the same road, and in the same wagon, in which Mama was taken away - symbolizes the restoration of emotional harmony to this once sad, lonely family.



Characters

Sarah Elisabeth Wheaton

Sarah finds herself in a challenging situation that an adult reader can more clearly understand than the young readers, who are the book's target audience. Young Anna and Caleb spend the entire time wondering whether Sarah will stay, or if she will choose to leave them, because she misses the sea. Grownup readers will understand that Sarah's decision will not be predicated on whether she misses the sea, but rather on whether she will be allowed to be herself with this new family.

Wives in this era were legally considered property, and women in general were denied the voting privileges taken for granted in today's modern democracy. Yet Sarah is a remarkably independent woman for her time. One of her first comments to Papa is to insist that her cat be allowed in the house, instead of sleeping in the barn where Papa suggests. Papa offers no reaction to this comment, neither affirmation nor opposition. He and Sarah are both careful around each other at first, but this natural caution on Papa's part leaves Sarah to wonder if he will be a tyrannical husband or if he is a kind man in search of a true and equal partner.

The events that reassure Sarah are not fully comprehended by the children. When Papa agrees to teach her to ride a horse and to drive the wagon by herself, Sarah's worries are much appeased. She presses her advantage immediately by insisting that he allow her to help him fix the roof. Spurred on by the oncoming storm, Papa agrees, and is thrilled to learn she is every bit as good of a carpenter as she promised. Sarah is equally pleased that her skills are a plus in his eyes, because many men of that era might have felt displeased to find such ability in a woman.

Papa, however, is quite egalitarian for his day, sharing the cooking duties with Sarah even as she shares the plowing with him. In addition to his acceptance of her liberated attitudes, Papa also appreciates her femininity. He demonstrates this appreciation by burying the dead lamb for her, by picking her flowers to wear in her hair, and by the many other ways in which he shows his appreciation for her whimsical side. Papa has missed the loving warmth of a female presence in his life, and feels fortunate to have found such a strong and capable woman to provide it.

Sarah puts Papa to the test when she announces that she is going to town by herself. The children are upset, because she doesn't tell them where or why she is going to town. They assume she means to leave them. Sarah, however, is only intent on showing Papa that she has the right to go when and where she pleases without asking for his permission. When Papa offers no objection whatsoever to her plan, he all but seals Sarah's decision to stay. She can relax now that she knows she will be allowed to be who she is in this new home. Papa is offering her everything she left Maine to find, a home of her own, a loving husband, beautiful children, and the right to be in charge of her own life. As Caleb learns in the end, Sarah's love cannot be forced. Only by allowing



Sarah her freedom can Papa assure her it is safe to stay here with him, hundreds of miles from the only home and family she has ever known.

Sarah's independence stretches back to her life in Maine. Clearly she learned her carpentry there, and, as the woman of the house, Sarah has been accustomed to the peer relationship she shares with her brother. They come from a loving family, and so Sarah is used to being treated like an equal in the household. Her willingness to give up this home and this independence for an uncertain future shows her bravery, as well as her love and respect for her brother. She leaves to allow him the happiness he seeks, and hopefully to find the same happiness for herself. These complex emotional issues are succinctly summed up by the author through the lesson that Caleb learns in the end. He had considered trying to prevent Sarah from leaving, but when she returns to him and announces her decision to join the family, Caleb's faith is rewarded. Sarah teaches him that he can trust her to be there for him, and that finding love is worth the scary risk of losing it.

Anna

Anna is a lovely and mature young lady. Her age is never disclosed in the course of the novel. The reader only knows that she is older than her brother, Caleb. Of the two of them, only Anna is old enough to remember Mama. Caleb's memories of his mother consist entirely of the stories that Anna tells. She doesn't want to taint Caleb's precious second-hand memories, so Anna kindly embroiders them so that Caleb's memories of Mama remain pure. In many such ways, Anna has been called upon to make decisions beyond her years. She feels responsible for Caleb, and is often moved to tears by his motherless plight. Her pity for him is the only way she allows herself to express her own pain at being without her mother.

Anna is reticent about showing her emotions, much as is her father. Throughout the novel, she speaks of Caleb's worries, and Caleb's fears, although it is evident from Anna's reactions that they are her fears as well. Anna is too reserved to express her love for Sarah in words at this time, but she manages to make her feelings clear in other ways. Anna makes a special point of telling Sarah that the wild roses bloom in the summer, which is Anna's way of hinting that she hopes Sarah will marry her father and perhaps use the roses in her wedding bouquet.

Anna is pleased when her brother follows up this hint by pointing out a local flower named bride's bonnet to the prospective bride. Anna tries to sell Sarah on the idea of staying by speaking of the good points about their life, and she becomes irritated with Caleb when he insists on bringing up negative aspects like the harsh blizzards of winter and the small size of their house. Anna betrays her hidden hopes when she sets an extra place for dinner even when Sarah is not there, and she betrays her fears with frequent nervous gestures as she works in the kitchen. Anna's shyness around Sarah prevents her from directly verbalizing her feelings, but Anna, through her behavior, makes a continuous appeal to Sarah to stay with them. Given that the story has a happy



ending, the reader can imagine that Anna will lose her shyness around Sarah over time, and that the two of them will bond like mother and daughter.

Caleb

Caleb, in many ways, is the heart of the household. When Sarah arrives, Caleb's shy father and sister leave it to Caleb to make friends with Sarah first. Caleb has no trouble engaging Sarah in conversation. He follows her around all day chattering with her, and by his eagerness, he shows Sarah how much she is wanted and needed by the family. Papa and Anna are far too shy to say such a thing, and they hardly need to speak at all the first few days, for Caleb has the conversation well in hand. On the surface, Caleb appears to be a confident and self-possessed young boy. As far as Sarah can tell, he is fearless when it comes to trying new things, and he is eager to learn all about Sarah.

However, underneath this confident facade lurks a great deal of fear. Caleb is terrified of losing Sarah. Even before he meets her, he has already fallen in love with the idea of Sarah, with the idea of having a mother for the first time in his young life. He bonds with her as if she were his true mother, for Caleb has never known another. Unlike his father and sister, who have loving and painful memories of Mama's life and death, Caleb knows only Sarah. Although Caleb never knew his mother, he knows what it felt like to lose her. Caleb never quite knew what he lost exactly by not having a mother, but the sense of loss has permeated his entire young life. This becomes clear as Caleb demonstrates a high degree of separation anxiety when Sarah leaves the farm for an afternoon. Caleb is certain that he will never see her again, and his fear is so great it moves his sister to tears. Both children are suffering from a certain level of posttraumatic stress syndrome, and Sarah's afternoon trip to town brings all their fears to the surface. When Sarah returns and brings the colors of the sea with her, Caleb knows, at last, that everything will be all right.

Papa (Jacob)

Papa is the strong and silent type, a man who generally prefers actions to words. Unlike his verbose son, Caleb, Papa speaks only when he has something to say, and his words are action-oriented. Papa's shyness contributes to his initial silence around Sarah. It takes Papa a little time to feel comfortable speaking with her, yet it's clear from his behavior that he is taken with Sarah from the start. After Sarah cuts Caleb's hair, she tosses his curls into the wind for the birds to use in their nests. This whimsical thoughtfulness is not lost on Papa. He says nothing, but later that evening, Anna catches him tossing his own cut curls into the wind. Papa begins to take a more active role in wooing Sarah a few days later, when she speaks longingly of the sand dunes by the beach. Papa leads them all out to the barn where he shows off his "hay dune" and invites Sarah to slide down it. This action on Papa's part demonstrates his fun-loving nature, as well as his desire to make Sarah feel at home. She responds favorably, clearly warmed by his actions.



In the final chapter when Sarah announces her decision to stay with a pretty speech to the children, Jacob verbalizes his own decision to marry her, but much more succinctly. Earlier, Sarah had taught the family that "Ayuh" is how people say "Yes" in Maine. As the family sits together at the dinner table, Papa comments cheerfully that when the preacher asks him if he will take Sarah for his wife, Papa intends to say "Ayuh."

Matthew

Matthew is the family's neighbor to the south. Matthew, just like Papa, is a widower with two young children, and a farm to run. It is Matthew who gives Papa the idea to advertise for a wife in the newspapers, for Matthew found his new wife, Maggie, through this very avenue. Maggie had responded to his ad from her home in Tennessee. Her arrival on his farm has brought laughter and joy back into the lives of Matthew and his daughters, Rose and Violet. When Matthew visits Papa and Sarah, Matthew expresses to Sarah how pleased he is that she has come. Matthew is happy that his beloved new wife now has a friend with whom she has so much in common.

Maggie

Maggie is a young woman who has much in common with Sarah. Like Sarah, Maggie responded to a classified advertisement by a farmer seeking a wife. Like Sarah, Maggie travels far from her home state of Tennessee to be with Matthew and his two young daughters. This union between Maggie and Matthew has been a success, apparently, as everyone seems to love Maggie. Anna describes her as having hair the color of turnips, and says that her laughter fills the house. Anna would love to have someone like Maggie come and fill her own house with laughter. Sarah's arrival is important for Maggie, whose loneliness is revealed in a conversation the two women have at the kitchen table. Maggie knows the isolation and loneliness that Sarah must feel, but she also knows it is possible to find happiness in a new home with a new family.

Maggie's character is important to Sarah's ultimate decision to stay. Maggie has found a happy ending, so it is easier for Sarah to believe she can, too. Also, Maggie knows exactly what Sarah is feeling, and knows how to address it. By bringing Sarah seedlings to plant a new garden with, Maggie demonstrates her understanding. She also makes a point by telling Sarah that she must try to grow the same types of flowers that she used to grow in Maine here in this new soil. Maggie is telling her that it is possible to transplant oneself to a new native land, and to thrive and to bloom, as Maggie has in her new home.

William

William is Sarah's brother. He is not directly present in the story, but he is an important figure in Sarah's life. She and her brother were raised in a loving family, and her accounts of William are invariably fond. He is a fisherman who loves the seashore as much as does Sarah. Until now, Sarah has been living with her bachelor brother, and



she has been the female head of the household. Now that William is married, she wishes to move out so his new wife can head her own household. William has by all accounts been a loving brother, and Sarah's leaving is in part inspired by her desire to see William and his new wife find the happiness they deserve.

Rose

Rose is one of Matthew's two daughters, both named after flowers. Maggie is her new stepmother who comes all the way from Tennessee in response to her father's advertisement for a wife.

Violet

Violet is one of Matthew's two young daughters. Maggie is Violet's stepmother. The reader is told that Violet and her sister, Rose, are considerably younger than Anna and Caleb, thus Violet's father did not wait as long as Papa did before finding himself a new wife.

Mama

Mama's presence in the story is felt only by her absence. When Mama was alive, the family home had been filled with love and laughter. She dies the night after giving birth to her second child, Caleb. Anna recalls how beautiful her mother had thought Caleb was. To this day, Anna regrets forgetting to say good night to her mother on the night Mama died. Since her death, Papa has stopped singing. Caleb never knew his mother, and never once hears his father sing until the day Sarah shows up at their home.



Objects/Places

The Colored Pencils

The gray, green and blue colored pencils that Sarah buys in town are her way of telling the family that she has decided to stay. She has missed the colors of the sea, but by buying these colored pencils, she shows Anna, Caleb and Papa that she has found a way to be happy living on a farm far away from the ocean.

The Cow Pond

Sarah, who misses swimming in the ocean, insists on using the cow pond as a swimming hole. Here, she teaches Caleb and Anna to swim.

The Dune of Hay

When Sarah speaks longingly of the sand dune that her brother, William, and she used to slide down back in Maine, Papa takes the whole family out to the barn to show off his hay dune. He places a ladder next to the large haystack in the barn, and everyone takes turns climbing up the ladder and sliding down the dune. This gesture warms Sarah's heart, and later that night, when she refers to it as "our dune," the children exchange meaningful glances.

The Garden

Maggie brings seedlings for Sarah and insists she plant a garden. Sarah had had a garden back home in Maine, and likes Maggie's idea so much that she plants the seedlings right away. Planting the garden symbolizes Sarah putting down roots in her new home.

The Moon Snail

The moon snail is a seashell that Sarah presents to Caleb. It is curly and smells of salt, and Sarah explains that the gulls drop these snail shells onto the rocks from high up in the air in order to break the snail's shell so the gulls can eat what's inside. Caleb thinks this is very clever of the gulls.

Nasturtiums

Nasturtiums are the type of flower that Sarah had in her garden in Maine. She is not sure if they will grow in this new climate, but Maggie insists that she try. When Sarah



decides to stay with her new family, she goes into town and comes back with nasturtium seeds to plant in her new garden, as a symbol of her decision to transplant herself to this new environment.

The Sea Stone

The sea stone is Sarah's gift to Anna. It is a perfectly polished piece of rock, worn smooth by the action of the water and the waves over time.

The Summer Roses

When Sarah first arrives in the spring, Anna tells her that the first wild roses bloom in the summertime. The timing of the roses blooming is meaningful to Anna, because summer is when Sarah and Papa's wedding will be, if they decide to get married. So, during the squall, when Sarah risks her safety to save an armful of summer roses from the storm, the reader realizes that the summer roses have become meaningful for Sarah, as well.

The Summer Song

Called "Sumer Is Icumen in," the summer song is the first song which Sarah teaches Papa, Caleb and Anna upon her arrival.

The Yellow Bonnet

Sarah wears a yellow bonnet when she arrives by train, so that Papa will recognize her. It is the yellow bonnet which Caleb first notices when Papa's wagon returns from the train station. Later, when Caleb and Anna are worried that Sarah has taken the wagon and left them for good, Caleb is overjoyed to once again spot the yellow bonnet in Sarah's approaching wagon.

Setting

Because MacLachlan does not refer to specific locations or historical events, both the geographic and temporal settings of *Sarah, Plain and Tall* are difficult to pinpoint. The story is set somewhere on the great American prairie at a time when horses still served as the major mode of transportation, probably in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. MacLachlan, born in Wyoming on the high plains, finds great joy and inspiration in this open country.

In *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, the prairie is a living presence whose weather and seasons constantly shape the lives of its inhabitants. An unseen but important additional setting is Sarah's beloved Atlantic Ocean, which she misses intensely after her relocation to the prairie. Its colors—green, blue, and gray—are essential elements of her world. When, at the end of the book, she drives to town and brings back green, blue, and gray colored pencils, Sarah fills a gap in both her life and the lives of the children. By bringing the colors of the sea to the prairie, Sarah serves as a personal bridge between the two environments, completing the family's household just as she has succeeded in completing the spectrum.



Social Sensitivity

MacLachlan, in her Newbery Medal acceptance speech, tells of her parents' influence on her and of their "belief that it is the daily grace and dignity with which we survive that children most need and wish to know about in books."

Perhaps the most outstanding quality of *Sarah, Plain and Tall* is its ability to speak movingly and honestly about what it means to belong to a family and to survive from day to day as a family.

Anna, Caleb, Papa, and Sarah all must work to make their lives together successful and meaningful. They make up their own games, tell their own stories, sing songs, and share in the work of the farm. The theme of sharing makes the book a positive reading experience. Its emphasis on ordinary people finding strength in ordinary relationships can only be encouraging to young readers, especially when the everyday difficulties of life often seem overwhelming. Although the family members in the book all fill traditional roles, the book is unlikely to strike anyone as sexist. Sarah's character refutes any such negative reading because in addition to her traditional role she insists on sharing in all the farm work, including those jobs usually assigned to men. Furthermore, Papa performs duties stereotypically associated with women without a hint of embarrassment or resentment. Anna, the narrator, is impressed by Sarah's insistence on helping with all the tasks necessary to make a farm succeed. By sharing the responsibilities for the farm and family, Sarah and Papa forge a successful relationship.

Literary Qualities

In her Newbery Medal acceptance speech, MacLachlan asserts that complex levels of meaning exist "behind each word or between words" and that the unspoken words often create the most powerful aspects of a book. Indeed, the title character of Sarah, Plain and Tall is a quiet woman. She shares her time, her interests, and her love, but she keeps her thoughts to herself.

Throughout the novel Anna must guess at Sarah's real intentions. When Sarah learns to repair the roof, she appears to want to stay. On the other hand, when she learns to drive a horse and buggy by herself, it seems that she might leave.

Sarah loved living near the great, wide-open sea, and she learns to love the similarly wide-open spaces of the prairie. The images of windswept fields and a prairie that "reached out and touched the places where the sky came down" complement Sarah's own character. Like the land of her new home, she has the capacity to speak with her silence and to make her actions more meaningful than words.

MacLachlan narrates the story from the point of view of Anna, a sensitive young girl who is mature enough to grasp some of the undercurrents of her family situation. Anna realizes that her father no longer sings because he is unhappy, and she notices from the start that Sarah misses her old home in Maine. By telling the story through the watchful eyes of Anna, MacLachlan stresses the importance of emotional ties among family members; Anna reacts to events ever mindful of how happy or unhappy Sarah seems, her concern a manifestation of her love for Sarah. The dialogue in the book is sparse, and thus plot advances are signaled primarily by a gradation of emotions. Hopeful yet slightly reserved at first, the children eventually open their hearts completely to Sarah. At the end of the story MacLachlan reports that "suddenly Caleb smiled," and this spontaneous show of emotion more accurately reflects the happiness that has come to the family than could any words Caleb might speak.

Themes

Home

The need for a home is universal to all human experience, yet the definition of home varies greatly from individual to individual. In the story, *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, it is the title character, Sarah, who must redefine what home means to her. Sarah had formerly loved the home she shared with her brother, William, along the coast of Maine. She and her brother shared a loving bond. As a fisherman, he earned the living for the household, but Sarah certainly pulled her own weight. She is an accomplished carpenter and painter, as well as a good cook and housekeeper.

Sarah is strong and energetic, and takes excellent care of the home she shares with William. However, when William marries and brings his new wife home, Sarah no longer feels that it is her home. Rightfully, she believes, the house should now belong to William and his new wife. Whether she reaches this decision out of pure generosity and love for her brother or out of her own desire to obtain for herself what the two of them share is not discussed by the author, yet it is clear that Sarah needs to redefine and expand her concept of home.

In the past, home has meant the seashore, with all its familiar birds and flowers. It has meant her nuclear family, her brother William, and before that, her parents. Sarah has not yet carved out her own home in her adult life, and it is now her time to do so. Having uprooted herself and traveled far away from everything familiar, Sarah must decide what qualities and attributes she can bring with her to her new home. When she arrives at the farm, young Caleb asks her if she has brought the sea.

With this remark Caleb unwittingly causes Sarah despair, for she expects to miss the sea greatly in her new home. What Sarah needs to decide is what elements are critical to creating a home. She comes to realize, as the children and Jacob worm their way into her heart, that love is one of the most important elements. She misses her brother greatly, but her love for her new family exceeds anything she has felt before.

The other critical element needed to make a good home, Sarah realizes, is the ability to feel at home, to be oneself. It is important for Sarah to feel that her new husband will respect all her personality, her personal choices, and her independent spirit. To this end, she tests her prospective husband's willingness to treat her as an equal, with an equal say in household decisions. Jacob offers no opposition to Sarah's decisions to let the cat stay in the house, to keep the chickens as pets instead of eating them, and to let Sarah come and go in the wagon as she sees fit.

For her part, Sarah actively learns to help Jacob plow the fields as he desires, as well as taking initiatives of her own such as giving the boys haircuts and teaching them new songs. The family's appreciation for Sarah's whimsical warmth makes her feel loved and



appreciated. Sarah's decision to stay ultimately reflects her true desire to make a home with her new, loving family.

Loss

Loss permeates this story from the very first sentence, in which little Caleb asks his older sister, for the hundredth time, thinks Anna ruefully, whether it's true that Mama sang every day. Caleb's inability to remember his mother tears at Anna's heart. Although she is still a young girl herself, Caleb's loss overshadows her loss, and Anna has taken it upon herself to try to fill in the vacuum that Mama's death left in Caleb's life. Anna has responded to her grief in a remarkably mature manner. Initially, the reader learns, Anna had blamed Caleb, whose difficult birth led to Mama's death.

This reaction, while wholly unfair to little Caleb, was indeed a natural and human reaction to the unfairness of her mother's death. To Anna's immense credit, it takes her only three days to realize that she and Caleb are in the same boat. In fact, she perceives that his situation is even sadder than hers. For Anna, at least, remembers her mother. She remembers what life was like when the house was filled with song and laughter. She felt her mother's love touch her life in so many ways which Caleb will never have a chance to feel.

Papa and Anna are more circumspect about their sense of loss. Although their loss runs deep, they both attempt to mask their feelings for Caleb's sake. Caleb thus, becomes the emotional voice of the family. He, more than Papa or Anna, keeps Mama's memory alive by his incessant questions about her personality and her habits. The reader knows very little of Mama, but the love her surviving family members feel for her is made plain by the depth of their sense of loss. Caleb cannot even imagine his Papa singing, although Anna remembers clearly how often he sang when Mama was alive. It is the death of the old songs that communicates to the reader the joy that died with Mama.

This is emotionally challenging subject matter for young readers, as it deals with death, grief, the loss of a parent, and the addition of a new family member to fill the void left by the loss. Author Patricia MacLachlan handles this theme in a positive and uplifting manner, although there is a notable lack of conflict in the story. Absent is any trace of resentment of Sarah by the children, although she is taking their mother's place. In such ways, the book really simplifies the feelings associated with loss.

Wish Fulfillment

Many stories, particularly those crafted for young children, deal with the concept of wish fulfillment. This theme is dealt with diversely in the various stories written about wish fulfillment. In many children's fairy tales, such as the Grimm Brothers fables, children are taught that wishing for things is dangerous, and that having one's wishes fulfilled can lead to disappointment. *Sarah, Plain and Tall* deals with wish fulfillment in a much lighter and more satisfying way. The author, Patricia MacLachlan, teaches her young readers the subtle distinction between wishing for someone's love and demanding it.



The lesson is taught through young Caleb's character. Caleb's dearest wish is to have a mother to love him.

When Papa takes steps to fulfill that wish by inviting Sarah to come and stay with the family, Caleb is overjoyed. However, competing with his joy is his fear of losing that joy once again. Caleb's desire to have Sarah as a mother is intense. The story covers the period of time in which Sarah must decide whether to stay with the family, permanently or not. This period of indecision is fraught with tension for little Caleb. He knows what he wants, and he has been offered a tantalizing glimpse of what it would be like to have his desire fulfilled. Caleb becomes understandably unwilling to give up this promising glimpse of life with a new mom.

As the moment of decision approaches, Caleb grows desperate. He pleads with his sister to help him prevent Sarah from leaving. Caleb suggests they might tie Sarah up in the house, or alternatively, he could fake an illness to guilt Sarah into staying with them. Anna, of course, tells him he cannot do any of those things. By her example, she teaches Caleb that he cannot force Sarah to love him; he can only hope that she will. This is a critical lesson for the young boy, for it will help him grow up to be a man like his father. Papa, despite his own fears of losing Sarah, agrees to her requests for greater independence, because he realizes she is an independent woman who likes to do things her own way.

Had Papa reacted to Sarah's request to drive the wagon by refusing, Sarah most likely would have felt constricted in her new life. His willingness to allow her the freedom she seeks, in turn allows her to feel free to love Papa and his children, and to stay on with them on the farm as their new wife and mother. Papa teaches Caleb, by example, that loving Sarah means allowing her to be herself and encouraging her to do what she needs to do to be happy. Had Papa reacted childishly, like Caleb, and refused Sarah her freedom, Papa would have surely lost Sarah. Instead, in the end, the family's faith in Sarah is rewarded when she chooses, of her own accord, to stay on and love them.



Themes/Characters

Anna, the narrator of this story, misses her deceased mother and must cope with an unruly younger brother.

Caleb is a chatterbox who also misses his mother, even though he never knew her. His constant questions make him a pest to Anna, and he realizes that his desire for attention sometimes makes him a problem for others. When Sarah comes, he is afraid that he might drive her away.

Papa, Jacob Witting, is a lonely and hard-working man. Like his children, he misses his wife, but he realizes that eventually he must move on with his life. Therefore, he places a newspaper advertisement "for help." "You mean a housekeeper?" Anna asks. "No," her father says. "Not a housekeeper. A wife."

Papa receives a reply from Sarah Wheaton, who lives in Maine. Although she loves living by the ocean, Sarah accepts Papa's offer to move inland and try living with him and his children.

The story focuses on Sarah and her new family getting to know one another.

Sarah is under no obligation to marry Papa and is free to leave if she so desires; much of the story's suspense depends on whether or not she will decide to stay. Sarah describes herself in a letter to Papa as "plain and tall."

Upon arriving at the farm, she proves to have good sense, an interest in helping with even the most physically demanding chores, and a quiet, warm personality.

Sharing is one of the important themes of the book. It is through sharing that Sarah slowly makes herself part of the family, and it is through sharing that the children come to know and love her. The children are at first unsure of whether they should share part of themselves with Sarah. Caleb thinks his unruly behavior might drive Sarah away; thus, he keeps his distance from her.

Anna is afraid that Sarah will miss the ocean too much and will leave the farm to return to New England; thus, she is slow to commit her love to Sarah. Only the farm animals are able to offer unconditional love, for they are not afraid of being hurt; MacLachlan notes that "the dogs loved Sarah first."

Sarah's efforts to share in all of the farm's labors, including the repairing of a roof, are tempered by her need for independence. When she learns to drive the wagon by herself and then leaves for town, the children and their father worry that she will not return. When she does return, she has not only established her freedom to stay or leave, but she has won the confidence of her new family. She has shown that she stays not out of necessity but out of choice.

MacLachlan presents the growth of the sharing relationship between Sarah and her new family deftly, making Anna's fears of rejection suspenseful while 'showing a gradual and believable development of bonds among the characters. This treatment makes Sarah, Plain and Tall a moving account of people developing a sense of belonging and a belief in their own self-worth.



Style

Point of View

The point of view is the eldest child's, Anna's, throughout the book, although the narration is delivered in the third person. Anna is a reticent young lady. She takes after her father, who does not verbalize his feelings often. The reader is thus forced to interpret how Anna feels about things based upon her reactions to the events of the story, particularly her reactions to her voluble little brother's many questions and concerns. Caleb, unlike Anna, is always ready to voice his emotions, particularly his fears about Sarah leaving them. While Anna does not verbally share this feeling, she bursts into tears nearly every time Caleb worries aloud that Sarah might leave.

Anna's point of view is somewhat unreliable, only because she is too young to properly interpret the warm, loving signals that Sarah gives off to the family. Anna sees the facts clearly, but she does not understand their meaning. If she did, she might not be so worried about the possibility of Sarah's leaving. Anna notices many signs that the reader interprets as positive, such as the growing closeness between Sarah and Papa, and the many ways in which Sarah makes herself useful on the farm and in the house. However, Anna does not take comfort from these signs, because her point of view, like her little brother's, is too clouded with fear for her to see clearly.

Setting

The time period in which *Sarah, Plain and Tall* is set is not specifically divulged at any point in the book, however, the author provides several cues which indicate it is set in turn of the century America. The transportation options available to the characters are limited to trains and horse-drawn wagons, indicating that the book takes place after the development of the railroads in this country, but prior to the proliferation of the automobile. The other major time cue is plot-related.

The practice of advertising in the papers for a spouse was common in the early days of America's westward expansion, as the population in any given area was often too sparse and spread out for men and women to meet eligible mates locally. Such advertising was distinct from today's classified personal ads, because the social mores of that era were different from today's. It would not have been considered proper in the late 1800's or early 1900's for Papa to advertise for a girlfriend. In order to attract a woman from another state, a man needed to offer the possibility of marriage.

The author does not divulge the physical location of the story, either, although it is evident from the storyline that it takes place in one of the land-locked states in this country. Sarah comes from Maine, Maggie hails from Tennessee, and both women had to travel far to reach the place where Anna and her family live. Since the children have never seen the sea, and its absence is an obstacle to the union between Sarah and



Papa, the family farm must be located somewhere in the heartland of the United States of America, where the only body of water to be found is the local cow pond. The author lovingly describes the local flora. Clearly, the farm has a natural charm all its own to rival the beauty of the sea which Sarah misses so dearly. Over time, Sarah learns to love the flowers and the fields as much as she still loves her beloved ocean.

Language and Meaning

The language in *Sarah, Plain and Tall* is simple and straightforward. The book is written for the early childhood level. It could be easily read by third or fourth graders, would provide a challenging read for second graders, and would make suitable material for reading aloud to children of a younger age. The sentences are short, simple, and to the point.

For the most part, the author avoids complex sentence structure, limiting each sentence to a single, simple idea. Yet the author, Patricia MacLachlan, still manages to convey complex emotional concepts within this simplistic structure. She achieves this by describing the characters' physical reactions to events, rather than using esoteric, emotionally-driven descriptive words. MacLachlan counts on her ability to deliver the story's emotional impact indirectly yet powerfully. She also counts on the reader's ability to derive emotional meaning from the actions of the characters. In this way, she does not underestimate her young readers by spelling everything out for them; she expects and allows them to draw meaning from the story she presents. For example, in Chapter 7 when Maggie meets Sarah, the author does not write that Anna is afraid of losing Sarah. She addresses the issue thusly:

"Maggie reached over and took Sarah's hand.

'I miss the hills of Tennessee sometimes,' she said.

Do not miss the hills, Maggie, I thought.

'I miss the sea,' said Sarah.

Do not miss the hills. Do not miss the sea.

I stirred and stirred the dough." (pg. 40)

Another way in which the author challenges her young readers is by including vocabulary words specific to the settings within the book. The fields surrounding the farm are abloom with such flora as Indian paintbrush, red and orange, blue-eyed grass and wild feverfew. This picturesque floral language evokes a colorful landscape while introducing the young reader to new terminology. The sea shore from whence Sarah comes provides additional floral descriptions, as in her old home, Sarah used to grow dahlias, columbine, and "nasturtiums the color of the sun when it sets" (pg. 41). Parents and educators might use this book as a means of introducing children to their own local



flora and fauna, particularly if combined with a colorful floral picture book or bulletin board display.

Structure

Sarah, Plain and Tall is divided into nine chapters, spanning a brief but important time period in the life of the main character's family. Winter is coming to a close as the story opens, and the reader quickly learns that Anna, her younger brother Caleb, and their Papa are all missing the matriarch of the family. Mama had died when Caleb was born, and the laughter and joy has disappeared out of this family's life in the ensuing years. Anna, still a young girl, has done her very best to fill the large, vacant shoes of her deceased mother. However, she knows in her heart that she and Caleb need more. Too young to understand her father's emotional needs, she nonetheless recognizes that running the farm is too big of a job for only one grown-up. Fortunately for Anna, Papa has realized all this, too. All of this exposition is covered in the very first chapter, including Papa's announcement that a woman named Sarah has answered the advertisement he placed in the papers for a new wife.

The remainder of the novel is dedicated to the growing relationship between the lonely family of three and their new friend, Sarah. The story arc is structured to match the changing seasons. Winter ends with Papa's first mention of Sarah, and she, his new love, arrives appropriately with the first blush of spring. Their relationship blooms along with the new spring flowers, and the possible wedding is scheduled to take place in the summer, when the wild summer roses bloom.

The summer roses thus become a metaphor for the upcoming nuptials. The storm that rocks the family farm is a metaphor as well, for the emotional weather inside the children. The storm represents their fear that Sarah will leave them before the summer wedding. When, during the storm, Sarah puts her safety at risk to save an armful of the wild summer roses, the reader begins to realize she has made her choice. The story ends with the announcement of her decision, rather than with the wedding itself. Thus, the story structure begins and ends with Sarah's decision to join the family, beginning with the introduction of the decision and ending with its resolution. The decision is depicted through the changing of the seasons in an earthy manner that complements the book's rural setting.



Quotes

"'You don't sing anymore,' he said. He said it harshly. Not because he meant to, but because he had been thinking of it for so long. 'Why?' he asked more gently." Chapter 1, pg. 7

"'One thing,' I said in the quiet of the room.

'What's that?' asked Papa, looking up.

I put my arm around Caleb.

'Ask her if she sings,' I said." Chapter 1, pg. 10

"Papa read it to himself. Then he smiled, holding up the letter for us to see.

Tell them I sing was all it said." Chapter 2, pg. 15

"'The cat will be good in the barn,' said Papa. 'For mice.'

Sarah smiled. 'She will be good in the house, too.'" Chapter 3, pg. 19

"My father did not see her look, but I did. And I knew that Caleb had seen it, too. Sarah was not smiling. Sarah was already lonely." Chapter 3, pg. 20

"'The roses will bloom in early summer,' I told Sarah. I looked to see if she knew what I was thinking. Summer was when the wedding would be. *Might* be. Sarah and Papa's wedding." Chapter 4, pg. 23

"She looked at her drawing of the fields for a long time.

'Something is missing,' she told Caleb. 'Something.' And she put it away." Chapter 5, pg. 31

"'Can't swim!' exclaimed Sarah. 'I'll teach you in the cow pond.'

'That's for cows!' I cried.

But Sarah had grabbed our hands and we were running through the fields, ducking under the fence to the far pond." Chapter 6, pg. 36

"Sarah's hair was in thick braids that circled her head, wild daisies tucked here and there. Papa had picked them for her." Chapter 7, pg. 38

"'What shall we name them?' asked Sarah, laughing as the chickens followed us into the house.

I smiled. I was right. The chickens would not be for eating." Chapter 7, pg. 43



"I closed my eyes, suddenly remembering Mama and Papa standing that way, Mama smaller than Sarah, her hair fair against Papa's shoulder. When I opened my eyes again, it was Sarah standing there." Chapter 8, pg. 49

"It is late, and Caleb is nearly sleeping by his plate and Sarah is smiling at my father. Soon there will be a wedding. Papa says that when the preacher asks if he will have Sarah for his wife, he will answer, 'Ayuh.'" Chapter 9, pg. 58



Topics for Discussion

1. Why is Anna uncomfortable around Caleb? Why does she associate him with her mother's death? Is it fair that she thinks of her mother's death when she thinks of Caleb?
2. Sarah is lonely, but she has turned down marriage proposals before answering Papa's advertisement. Why would she come to live with strangers on the prairie if there are men in Maine who want to marry her?
3. Why is it important that Sarah sings "Sumer Is Icumen In"?
4. Why is it such a shock to Sarah to find the dead sheep?
5. Sarah teaches Anna and Caleb how to swim. How does this affect their growing relationship?
6. Maggie, a neighbor's wife, teaches Sarah that "there are always things to miss, no matter where you are." Maggie, Sarah, and Anna all miss something.

What does each miss? What does this tell the readers about each character?

7. Sarah insists on helping Papa repair the roof and on learning to drive a horse and wagon. Why doesn't she let Papa repair the roof himself, considering that the task is difficult and there is a squall coming on? Why does she insist on driving the wagon by herself when Papa can take her where she likes?
8. Sarah runs out into a nasty squall to tend her chickens. Why? What do you think of the description of the squall itself?
9. Caleb says that Sarah's drawing lacks the colors of the sea. Why is this important?

»Ideas for Reports and Papers 1. The prairie and its changing seasons and weather play an important role in the novel. Discuss how the weather and seasons affect events and how they reflect the characters' actions and emotions.

2. What did farm children do for fun in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? What were some of their favorite games? What were their toys?

How did children on remote midwestern farms get their schooling?

3. Research the everyday life of a farm woman during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What were the most difficult aspects of this life? In what ways was prairie life rewarding or unrewarding?

4. It is very important to Anna, Caleb, and Papa that they form a traditional family unit that includes a mother. How important was the family unit to people living on prairie



farms in Sarah's day? Is the basic family unit of father, mother, and children still important on midwestern farms?

5. The children like to sing and value Sarah's singing to them. How important was singing for pleasure in the days before radios, television, and the movies? What sort of songs would people sing in their own homes? Be sure to cite some examples; they do not have to be famous songs. Quote a few lines to give your reader a good idea of what you are talking about. If you make this an oral report, try singing or playing a few bars on a musical instrument.



Essay Topics

Give three examples from the story that show how much Sarah loves animals.

In her first letter, Sarah tells Papa that she is not mild-mannered. Can you give two examples from the story of how that is true?

Of all the nice things Sarah does for her new family, what do you think is the kindest?

Of all the nice things Papa does for Sarah, which do you think is the kindest?

Why doesn't Caleb want Papa to teach Sarah to drive the wagon by herself? Why is he afraid?

If you had to write a letter, like Caleb and Anna, to someone who might be coming to live with your family, what would you want to know about this person?

Give two ways in which Papa and Sarah make a good team, using examples from the story.

Further Study

Babbitt, Natalie. "Patricia MacLachlan: The Biography." Horn Book 62 (July/August 1986): 414-416. Babbitt analyzes MacLachlan's character and outlook.

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something about the Author*. Vol. 42. Detroit: Gale Research, 1986. Contains a twoparagraph summary of MacLachlan's career, with a few comments about the novels.

MacLachlan, Patricia. "Newbery Medal Acceptance." Horn Book 62 (July/ August 1986): 407-413. This is MacLachlan's response to receiving the Newbery Medal for *Sarah, Plain and Tall*. In an emotional and humorous discussion, she talks about the influences on her writing, her hopes for how young readers will respond to her books, and her views about language and literature.

MacLachlan, Robert. "A Hypothetical Dilemma." Horn Book 62 (July/August 1986): 416-419. Robert MacLachlan provides significant details about his wife's life, family, and friends. The portrait he provides is of a loving, warm-hearted, and busy woman.

Related Titles

Arthur, for the Very First Time describes the adventures of a shy tenyear-old who spends a summer in the country. It features the same fine characterization one finds in Sarah, Plain and Tall. The illustrations by Lloyd Bloom are sensitive and evocative of character and place. In Cassie Binegar, a girl learns to cope with her eccentric family. Unclaimed Treasures delves into the longings and dreams of girlhood.



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