

The Tamarack Tree Short Guide

The Tamarack Tree by Patricia Clapp

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Contents

The Tamarack Tree Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	13
Related Titles.....	14
Copyright Information.....	15

Overview

A coming-of-age story, *The Tamarack Tree* describes the journey from fourteen-yearold girlhood to young adulthood through the trauma, tragedy, and triumph of the American Civil War. The author uses historical fiction to introduce the reader to this war, slavery, and the antebellum South.

The chapters are written as if they were taken from the diary of Rosemary Leigh, who lived in Vicksburg from 1859 to 1863.

Rosemary is an orphaned English girl who comes to live with her brother in Vicksburg. She becomes a close friend with Mary Byrd—the daughter of a plantation owner.

She also befriends Ben, who later enlists in the Confederate Army to fight the "Yankees." Rosemary falls in love with Jeff—a young man who decides to fight for the Union army. While in Vicksburg, Rosemary also learns about slavery, "free Negroes," and the Underground Railroad.

As the war unfolds, Rosemary and her friends cannot escape its impact on their lives. No longer can Rosemary and Mary Byrd live in the world of parties, shopping, and servants tending to their every need.

The war tests their ability to survive on a daily basis—what they eat, how they dress, where they live, and what they think is moral and right. Other characters in the book also face moral decisions because of the war. For Jeff, it is the decision to support the Union cause at risk of losing his love, Rosemary. For Ben, the war points him toward a course of action that will shorten his life.

About the Author

Patricia Clapp was born in 1912 in Boston. She attended the Columbia University School of Journalism. She describes herself as a "theater person" and has worked with community theater for more than forty years. Clapp has directed and written numerous plays for children, young adults, and adults; and she has had several poems published. Clapp is a grandmother and great-grandmother who lives in Upper Montclair, New Jersey.

Events in her life are reflected in her works for young adults. After receiving a genealogy of her family, the author discovered that an ancestor, Constance Hopkins, came over on the Mayflower. Intending to write a play about her life, Clapp decided instead to write her story as a diary or journal. The result was *Constance: A Story of Early Plymouth*, a novel for young adults. After reading issues of *Century* magazine, Clapp's interest was sparked by articles about the Civil War—including excerpts from a diary of a young woman. This prompted her to begin writing what would become *The Tamarack Tree*.

Constance: A Story of Early Plymouth was a runner-up for the 1969 National Book Award for Children's Literature and the 1969 Lewis Carroll Shelf Award. *Witches' Children* was selected as an ALA Best Book for Young Adults. *The Tamarack Tree* also received strong reviews in *Horn Book* and *School Library Journal*. The *Horn Book* review states, "Clapp lets the character speak for herself," and the descriptions of life in Vicksburg "create an unforgettable background."

All three novels are still in print.

Even though Clapp's titles are ten to thirty years old, they remain popular with students and teachers. Frequently, her works are used to teach social studies and appear on library recommended reading lists. In some classrooms, her works are used to supplement traditional history texts in order to engage student interest in American history. Her ability to give her characters a voice reaches each generation of new readers.

Setting

The novel is set in Vicksburg, Mississippi, an important town in the antebellum South (the South before the Civil War).

Home to plantation families who depend on cotton and slaves to make a profitable and comfortable living, Vicksburg is a strategic trading port because of its location on the Mississippi River between New Orleans and Memphis. Located on high bluffs overlooking the river, Vicksburg is the key to controlling riverboat traffic. Because of the economic and strategic location of the town, the Union army needs to conquer Vicksburg in order to divide the South. The siege of this river port is a crucial battle in the Civil War, and the loss of Vicksburg foreshadows the fall of the South. Thus, Vicksburg is the perfect backdrop for telling the story of a girl torn between her Southern friends and her love of a Union soldier.

Social Sensitivity

Slavery and how the characters feel about it define relationships in the novel. Rosemary and her friend Mary Byrd share their interest in boys, clothes, and parties. However, Rosemary and Mary Byrd disagree about slavery. Even so, they are able to remain friends. Conversely, Rosemary and Jeff agree about slavery, but disagree about which side to support before he goes off to fight. Mary Byrd and Derek disagree about slavery, and it almost ends their relationship. Even though the issue of slavery plays a prominent role among the characters in the novel, the graphic and harsh life of a slave is only alluded to in this novel. Other novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can provide a more detailed account of slave life.

However, the varied points of view held by Northerners and Southerners about slavery are well covered in the novel.

Southerners are portrayed as "threedimensional" in this novel. They are gracious and honor bound, with a duty to family and state, yet willing to defend a way of life built on the backs of slaves.

Although the reader is not given a detailed account of the drudgery, fear, and misery of being a slave, the reader is given a glimpse into the female world of the South. Women members of plantation families are portrayed as ignorant about the lives of the men, women, and children who labor in their fields and homes.

The characters of Hector, his wife, Amanda, and their child are representative of "Free Negroes" living in Vicksburg. Clapp hints at the role free men and slaves played in the underground war against slavery.

Blacks and whites, Yankees and Southerners, men and women were participants in the war against slavery. Black men and women were active in fighting slavery through the press, the Underground Railroad, and fighting against the South in the Union army.

Literary Qualities

Clapp recounts that the history taught in grade school was "always just text." There were "no words" or personal feelings— such as fear, joy, or sadness. Thus, the author relies on the journal or diary as a literary device for Constance and *The Tamarack Tree*. The first-person account provides an immediacy and relevancy to the reader, and proves much more interesting than a history textbook.

Clapp presents important characters and events of the Civil War—Abraham Lincoln and General Grant—by mentioning articles that appeared in newspapers of the day, such as the *Citizen*. Incorporating news reports allows the reader to discover these events as Rosemary does. Thus, the author avoids writing a textbook history of the war and siege of Vicksburg.

Clapp believes writing historical fiction allows "history to speak for itself." As a woman of the theater, the spoken word— dialogue—has always been an important part of her life. Clapp uses Southern colloquialisms sparingly. The Southern dialect is hinted at—just enough to give the reader the idea that the spoken word was different in Civil War Vicksburg than in the United States today. The reader also is provided a glimpse into the landscape of the South. Rosemary describes the first time she sees slaves working in fields along the Mississippi River. A few details about the clothing, housing, and food present in Vicksburg are noted. The author then is able to describe how the day-to-day necessities change as the siege of Vicksburg progresses. Rosemary, Mary Byrd, and others must change their eating, sleeping, and dressing habits to survive the siege. Their expectations about daily comforts change the longer the city is surrounded. The plantation families of Vicksburg who survive the "battle" realize there is more to life than beautiful dresses, lavish parties, and sumptuous dinners.

Themes and Characters

As in her other historical novels and biographies, Clapp presents a strong female protagonist—whether real or invented. The Tamarack Tree is the only novel in which she created the heroine—although Clapp used actual diary entries kept by a young woman during the siege to help create the character of Rosemary.

Even though Rosemary is faced with her mother's death, moving to a new country, and war, this is not a sad or depressing work. Rosemary is an optimist, and she believes in herself. She confronts her problems and deals with them the best she knows how and consequently becomes stronger through her adversity. She finds friends, romance, and courage. The story has a happy ending as Rosemary and Jeff, and Mary Byrd and Derek, fall in love and marry. It is a Hollywood ending to an historic chapter in American history.

Mary Byrd is gracious, friendly, flirtatious, and a supporter of the slave-based economy driving the South. Like many Southerners, she believes that slaves are "childlike" and need protection. Mary Byrd explains that the slave owners provide all necessary comforts for their slaves in return for a hard day's work. Thus, the master and the slave are dependent on each other to "get along." Despite Mary Byrd's and Rosemary's differing sentiments, they become best of friends.

Rosemary is horrified that any human being could actually own another person.

She is stunned that such gracious Southern families would feel no remorse or hypocrisy about owning a person in the United States of America—a country with a constitution promoting freedom. Several characters in the story influence Rosemary's antislavery sentiments. Derek, Rosemary's brother, and Jeff, her love interest, support the Union's call to end slavery. Rosemary's Uncle William and his "free Negro" assistant, Hector, are active members of the Underground Railroad. Their activities are kept undercover until the end of the story when Rosemary and Mary Byrd discover a secret tunnel used by escaping slaves.

The male characters in the novel are supporting actors in this drama. Their characters are developed in relation to Rosemary and Mary Byrd—primarily as romantic interests. The characters of Derek and Jeff represent the beliefs held by many Northerners regarding the moral issues surrounding slavery. On the other hand, Ben voices ideas held by many Southern boys and men who thought the war would end within the year as it was a matter of personal honor to defend one's state from invasion. Many Southerners—even the many who did not own slaves—resented Northern attempts to dictate how Southerners should live their lives.

The Tamarack Tree ultimately demonstrates that the reasons for the Civil War were not just about slavery, but about a way of life and an economic system. Derek attempts to explain to Rosemary the points of view of Yankees and Southerners about the rationale for war. Most Southerners were not slave owners. Some Northerners did not believe

blacks should have the same opportunities as whites. Moral, political, and economic forces influenced which side of this conflict was "right" for the men and women of the South and North. Because the war and the causes it represented were often personal issues as well, brothers fought brothers, and families were divided. This division between governments, states, and families is paralleled by the personal decisions made by the male and female characters in the novel. The Tamarack Tree is a story of conflict and its necessary role as part of the process to become whole—in order to grow as an individual and as a nation.

Topics for Discussion

1. Do you think the author accurately portrays how Southerners and Northerners viewed slavery? Is it a balanced account?
2. Ben wishes that he were dead. Does this statement lead the reader to foretell Ben's death? Are there any other incidents that foretell his death?
3. "Sometimes waiting for something bad to happen is worse than the actuality," writes Rosemary in May 1862. What does she mean by this statement?
4. Near the end of the novel, Mary Byrd tells Rosemary, "I reckon maybe I've grown up a little." What is she talking about? How does this affect her relationship with Derek?
5. Jeff tells Rosemary that "a man must be willing to protect what he thinks is right and try to change what he thinks is wrong" in order to explain his decision to fight for the Union. What would you be willing to "protect" or to "change" in your life or your community?
6. Why do you think the author chose an English girl rather than a Southern girl to tell the story of the siege of Vicksburg?
7. Rosemary and Mary Byrd interact differently with boys. Mary Byrd flirts and acts coyly. Rosemary is more straightforward. Which is the better method to relate to the opposite sex? Why do you think they act differently toward boys?
8. Prejudice is an element in the novel. Different characters have different prejudices. Can you identify these prejudices?
9. Choose an incident from the book you liked the best. Read this passage to the class and describe why you chose it.
10. This novel takes place from 1859 to 1863. Rosemary develops from a girl to a young woman through her experiences in Vicksburg. Choose another character who changes or grows as a person in this novel and discuss the character development.
11. "Since we came here, I have thought the South was beautiful, but now it's like seeing a perfect shining stone in the woods and picking it up to find ugly worms on the underside." What do you think Rosemary means by this statement?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Explore one of the Union and one of the Confederate generals mentioned in the novel. Describe how their personalities are used in the novel. Using other books, find other comments about public sentiment (Union or Confederate) toward these generals.
2. The characters in the novel use phrases that are not part of popular English in today's society. For example, "Don't fret" or "I reckon Mamma put it in the basket." Look in a dictionary to find the meaning of these words. Locate another word in the novel or in a dictionary that is not commonly used today and write about the origin and history of the word's usage.
3. The author briefly describes the Underground Railroad in the novel. Research and more fully explain the Underground Railroad: How did it work? Who helped the slaves using the Underground Railroad? Who were some famous people who were involved with the Underground Railroad?
4. Rosemary is keeping a diary of her life in Vicksburg. Why do you think diary writing was important to men and women in the past? Keep a diary of your life for one month. Include parts of your diary in a written report and explain what events were important to you and why.
5. Because the siege of Vicksburg lasted so long, the citizens had to "make do" with many items—even skinned rats were sold in the market. If you were not able to buy new clothes for one year, how would you make do? Try to locate recipes that Americans have used during wartime or during the Great Depression to stretch their food budget.

Write about how you would survive if you could not buy the clothes or food you wanted or needed.
6. Many of the young men joining the Confederate Army were excited and believed the war would last less than a year. In reality, the life of a soldier was harsh and dangerous—as portrayed by the character of Ben. Locate other books that provide a firsthand account of life as a soldier during the Civil War. Write about the soldier's experiences.
7. The Merrimack and the Monitor warships are mentioned in the novel. Why were these ships so important in the history of naval warfare? Write an indepth account of their famous battle.
8. Mary Byrd and Rosemary tended to the wounded in a local hospital. Write a report on hospitals and the medical care soldiers received during the Civil War. Can you locate any books describing medical practices used on the battlefield or in the hospital? Or write about the role of nurses tending to the wounded during the war.

9. Near Vicksburg is the Vicksburg National Military Park. Research the park through books, the Internet, or pamphlets. Write about the park—how it got started, how many people visit the park, who is buried there, and the memorials to different troops.
10. Rosemary is an orphan. If you have lost a friend or family member, can you write about the impact death has had on you? Do you think diary writing helped Rosemary get over the loss of her mother or the other traumatic events in her life?
11. Choose one of the books or articles listed in the bibliography at the end of the novel. Write a review of the item and describe why you think the author consulted the item while writing *The Tamarack Tree*.

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Howell, Margaret C. Review of *The Tamarack Tree*. *School Library Journal* 33 (October 1986): 188. A short review.

Stable-Perez, Maria A. "A Kaleidoscope of Perspectives in Children's Literature about Slavery and the American Civil War." *The Social Studies* 87, 1 (1996): 2431. The author discusses and reviews books of interest to elementary, middle, and junior high readers in learning about American attitudes and values during the Civil War. *The Tamarack Tree* is discussed.

Review of *The Tamarack Tree*. *Booklist* 83 (November 15, 1986): 501.

Review of *The Tamarack Tree*. *Horn Book* 62 (September 1986): 594-596. A lengthy and positive review.

Review of *Witches' Children*. *Booklist* 78 (May 15, 1982): 1254.

Review of *Witches' Children*. *Center for Children's Books Bulletin* 35 (March 1982): 123.

Related Titles

Mary E. Lyons's *Letters from a Slave Girl: The Story of Harriet Jacobs* (New York: Atheneum, 1992) is based on Jacobs's autobiography and presented as letters she might have written from 1825, at age twelve, until she escaped north in 1842. This is a moving evocation of the tragedies inflicted by slavery.

In F. N. Monjo's *The Vicksburg Veteran* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), twelve-year-old Fred Grant relates what he saw when he accompanied his father, General Grant, on the campaign to capture Vicksburg.

After the Civil War makes an orphan of twelve-year-old Will Page in Carolyn Reeder's *Shades of Gray* (Camelot, 1992), he's forced to leave his city home and live in the Virginia countryside with an uncle who refused to fight for the Confederacy—a man Will considers to be a traitor and a coward.

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