

Tom's Midnight Garden Short Guide

Tom's Midnight Garden by Phillipa Pearce

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Overview

Tom's Midnight Garden is an appealing story on many levels. Tom, a young boy, is sent away to spend the summer at the rented flat, or apartment, of his aunt and uncle. He is lonely and homesick but late one night discovers a mysterious, enclosed garden that although invisible during the day, appears after midnight. His excursions into this garden take him into a magical world where the past and present intersect, and he finds that he can visit with a girl from the past, who becomes his friend. For Tom the summer passes in days, but it seems to pass in years for the little girl, who gradually grows up and matures with each visit. Both Tom and Hatty, the Victorian girl, are sympathetically developed.

Beautifully written, the novel offers a variety of moods, with moments of poignancy, flashes of humor, instances of danger, and touches of joy and disappointment. The narrative is suspenseful, the characters are lifelike, and the themes are thought-provoking. The novel captures at once the sense of fixed childhood memories and of the inevitable transformations of growth.

About the Author

Ann Phillipa Pearce was born in 1920 in the village of Great Shelford in Cambridgeshire, England. Her father was a flour-miller, and she was raised, along with her sister and two brothers, in the millhouse where she had been born. Pearce continues to reside in that same house. Her childhood memories of the water-mill and of swimming and fishing in the river are reflected in the settings of some of her stories.

After graduating with honors from Girton College, Cambridge University, where she specialized in English and history, she worked as a civil servant until after World War II. She then took a job as a radio scriptwriter and producer for the British Broadcasting Company.

She later worked in the education department of Oxford University Press, and then as the first editor of children's books for Andre Deutsch, a London publishing house. In 1963 she married Martin Christie, who died in 1965. They raised one daughter, Sarah.

Pearce's first book for young adults, *Minnow on the Say* (1955), was partly written during her convalescence from tuberculosis. A runner-up for the Carnegie medal, the book helped to establish her reputation as a writer for juvenile readers. Her next book, *Tom's Midnight Garden*, won the prestigious Carnegie Medal in 1958. *A Dog So Small* earned the New York Herald Tribune Children's Spring Book Festival Award in 1963.

In the 1960s and early 1970s Pearce wrote the text for children's picture books and several short story collections for older children and young adults, including *The Elm Street Lot* (1969) and *What the Neighbors Did* (1972). In 1978 Pearce won the Whitbread award for *The Battle of Bubble and Squeak*. Her first long novel in many years, *The Way to Sattin Shore*, appeared in 1983.

Pearce's outstanding fiction for young readers ranges from the severe realism of some of her short stories to the imaginative fantasy of *Tom's Midnight Garden*. Using the Cambridgeshire countryside of her childhood as the setting for most of her books, she is notable for evoking a vivid sense of place. Many critics consider *Tom's Midnight Garden* one of the best novels written for young adult readers in the twentieth century.

Setting

At the beginning of the book, Tom's brother is ill with the measles. To protect him from catching the disease, his parents send Tom to stay with his aunt and uncle in their small flat in the city.

This is a drastic change for Tom, who is used to spending hours in the garden behind his family's large house. His aunt and uncle do not have a garden; in fact, there is not even a yard. Several scenes take place inside the flat or elsewhere in the spacious old house that has been subdivided into smaller flats, but most of the action takes place in the mysterious garden that appears after dark. This elusive garden, Tom eventually learns, actually existed some fifty years earlier but it has since been paved over and is used to store garbage cans.



Social Sensitivity

Pearce shows a genuine concern for the negative aspects of class consciousness. Hatty's aunt is an extreme example; she regards her niece as a charity case and warns her sons against ever marrying her. The aunt's snobbery extends to the gardener, whom she regards as "stupid as a cow in a meadow." While Abel and the cows can see Tom when he visits the garden in the past, the aunt is too insensitive to see him or sense his presence.

Pearce is also aware of destructive changes in society, such as urbanization and the dangers of increased pollution. The image of the dirty pavement filled with dustbins as the modern successor to the idyllic garden is a striking example. Tom's Aunt Gwen attributes the change to the increase in the number of factories.

Pearce addresses prejudice as an adjunct to her theme of youth and age.

Those who live in Mrs. Bartholomew's house and rent flats from her—including Tom's aunt and uncle—are prejudiced against her, assuming that she, as an old woman, is by nature disagreeable and difficult to get along with. When it is revealed that she is actually Hatty grown old, the reader realizes how terribly these people have misjudged her.

Ironically, the old woman grows much closer to Tom than his own relatives do.

Literary Qualities

Tom's *Midnight Garden* is a superb work of literature. The captivating style ranges from poetic suggestiveness to colloquial conversations. The descriptions of the garden are concrete and vivid, and the author's keen eye for detail enables her to describe objects, such as the ancient grandfather clock, in a way that gives them a graphic immediacy. As a symbol, the clock's uneven performance suggests both the exactness of timekeeping and the elusiveness of relative time. It is fitting that Mrs. Bartholomew, who spans the past and present, is the one who always winds the clock.

The garden setting, with its strong allusions to the innocence and perfection of the biblical Garden of Eden, gives a mythic dimension to the story. When the tree in the garden is struck by lightning and falls, it symbolizes both the destructive aspect of time and the fall of humans from divine grace and innocence. The gardener, who is named Abel, strengthens the biblical allusiveness of the setting.

One subtle feature of the novel is the subtle change in prose style from the beginning to the end. The final chapters display greater control and more maturity in both content and linguistic cadences. The evolution of style mirrors the maturation of Tom over the course of the narrative. There are moments in the garden when time seems to have stopped, but Tom has been developing in his understanding.



Themes and Characters

Tom displays a realistic combination of strengths and weaknesses. Living with a childless couple who do not seem to understand him, he develops an intense longing for companionship, which is fulfilled by Hatty, the girl he meets in the garden.

Preoccupied with his own feelings, Tom is not always considerate of others, but he matures during the course of the story and develops greater sensitivity. Hatty is also a lonely child, orphaned and living with an aunt who is extremely unkind to her. Her friendship with Tom is important to her, and their disagreements, as in the scene where each accuses the other of being a ghost, are dramatic and convincing.

Hatty lives with three cousins— Hubert, James, and Edgar. Hubert, the oldest, has little importance in the story, but James is portrayed as gentle and understanding, while Edgar is meanminded and delights in getting Hatty into trouble. A better friend to Hatty than any of these boys is the gardener, Abel, a devoutly religious man who tries to protect her from harm.

Several adults appear in the story, including Tom's aunt and uncle and Hatty's aunt and uncle. Tom's Uncle Alan is a well-meaning man, but rather too rigid in his thinking to understand an imaginative youngster like Tom. Aunt Gwen, having no children of her own, smothers Tom with maternal affection although she does not really understand him. Hatty's aunt and uncle have taken her in out of necessity after her parents died. The aunt, in particular, is coldhearted and snobbish, the one real villain in the story. The landlady, the elderly Mrs. Bartholomew, takes on increasing significance as the plot unfolds.

Her conversations with Tom are warm and genuine and contrast with the bumbling attempts of other adults to talk with youngsters.

Tom's *Midnight Garden* is thematically rich. The major themes are the nature of time, the patterns of growth and transformation, the relationship of past and present, and of youth and age. The most important theme is that of time, first introduced by a symbolic object—an old grandfather clock that strikes the hours with eccentric irregularity, occasionally even striking thirteen. Different conceptions of time are experienced and then discussed by the characters. Hatty shows Tom the message imprinted within the clock: "Time no Longer"—a phrase taken from a verse in Revelation.

For Tom, time seems to stop when he is in the magical garden, but it races ahead for Hatty, who grows up while he stays the same. When Uncle Alan tries to explain the nature of time by drawing a diagram on a piece of paper, Tom realizes that his own conception is not nearly so mathematical. Tom's speculations on the nature of time grow more complex as the book progresses, and his perceptions, although imaginative, become more meaningful than his uncle's scientific explanations.

Closely related to the idea of time is the relationship between past and present and the inevitability of change. Where the lovely garden existed in the past, there is now but a



strip of paving where dustbins are kept. The spacious home that once housed a single family has been converted into smaller flats that house many couples and families. What has not changed is the timeless nature of the young people's enjoyment of the garden.

Also related to the theme of time is the relationship of youth and age. Neither Tom nor Hatty achieves a good relationship with their respective aunts and uncles, and, to an extent, the adults in their world seem to lack understanding of youngsters. The notable exception is Hatty herself, grown old as Mrs. Bartholomew. In a touching conversation, she and Tom share their dream experiences and find that they have become close friends, in spite of their vast separation in age and years. When Tom bids her farewell, he hugs her, as his aunt notes, as if she were a girl. Pearce seems to suggest that age, as such, does not separate people, but attitudes do.



Topics for Discussion

1. In the opening chapter Tom seems sullen and selfish, even rude. Why does the reader feel sympathy for him?
2. What significance does Tom find in the grandfather clock's striking of the thirteenth hour?
3. Why does Abel fear trouble for Hatty when Tom helps her make the bow and arrows?
4. What is Abel's attitude toward Tom?

What part does his religious fervor play in forming that attitude?

5. How does Tom resolve in his own mind that troubling issue of whether he or Hatty is actually a ghost?
6. Hatty tells Tom a pretend story about being a princess in captivity. In what ways does she actually succeed, as Tom says, in making "this garden a kind of kingdom"?
7. Tom tells his brother Peter all about the garden and Hatty, but he never mentions his adventures to his aunt and uncle, not even at the end of the book when he must return home. Why does he never tell them anything about it?
8. Why is Uncle Alan so upset when Tom mentions the angel from Revelation in connection with theories of time? How does this episode reflect the fundamental differences between the boy and his uncle?
9. How is it possible that Peter enters one of the dreams shared by Tom and Hatty?
10. Does the ending come as a surprise or should the careful reader be prepared for it? Is it a satisfactory ending?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Pearce uses symbolic objects with great effect in Tom's Midnight Garden.

How do the Gothic barometer, the grandfather clock, and the ice skates function as symbols?

2. Tom's Midnight Garden is a highly original time fantasy. During the course of the narrative, what views of time are expressed? What does Tom learn about the nature of time through his adventures in the magical garden?

3. The close reader may notice several hints during the novel about the eventual importance of old Mrs. Bartholomew as a character. What are these hints? Where and when does she appear significantly?

4. Hatty is depicted as a solitary child, partly because she is an orphan living with three older male cousins. How does she become friends with Tom, and what kinds of activities do they enjoy sharing in the garden?

5. Dreams are important in this novel.

One of the interesting ideas offered is the possibility of shared dreams. What is there in Tom's personality that makes him receptive to Mrs. Bartholomew's dreams?

6. Some critics have argued that the "magic" is a Garden of Eden, a symbol of Tom's and Hatty's innocence, and that is why they must leave it as they grow up. Do you agree or disagree?

For Further Reference

Aers, Lesley. "The Treatment of Time in Four Children's Books." *Children's Literature in Education* 2 (1970): 6981. The novel is discussed in the context of other children's books concerned with the theme of time.

Cameron, Eleanor. *The Green and Burning Tree: On the Writing and Enjoyment of Children's Books*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1969. Based on a lecture, a chapter of this study deals with time fantasies written for young adults.

Related Titles

Phillipa Pearce's first book for young adults, *Minnow on the Say*, is on one level a first-rate mystery story. But it is also an effective evocation of a boy's life in an East Anglican village. Two boys, Adam and David, are convincingly drawn, and their treasure hunt is exciting, frustrating, and rewarding. The pervasive presence of the river adds much to the mood of the book, and the Say is as much a character as a vividly described setting of the narrative.

Pearce followed the fantasy of Tom's *Midnight Garden* with a more realistic novel, *A Dog So Small*. The central figure of this novel is a lonely boy, Ben, who is obsessed with the desire to have a puppy. His disappointment when he does not receive one on his birthday is enormous. When he eventually does get the much wanted pet, he finds that a real dog does not measure up to his imagined chihuahua. This book is essentially a character study, and Ben is a convincing protagonist, whose relationship with his grandfather further explores the theme of childhood and old age.

Pearce's short story collections, *The Elm Street Lot* and *What the Neighbors Did*, are realistic accounts of everyday events in the lives of young people. In *The Battle of Bubble and Squeak* the members of a family argue about a pair of gerbils. The story examines family tensions as the pet gerbils change the lives of all concerned.

Pearce's most recent book, *The Way to Sattin Shore*, is a mystery concerning Kate, a young girl whose father drowned the day she was born. Kate sets out to discover why his gravestone keeps disappearing. All of these works for young readers are appealing for their credible characters, imaginative plots, and stylistic excellence.

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