

# **The Wish Giver: Three Tales of Coven Tree Study Guide**

**The Wish Giver: Three Tales of Coven Tree by Bill Brittain**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">The Wish Giver: Three Tales of Coven Tree Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Prologue.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Tale 1, Part 1.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Tale 1, Part 2.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Tale 2, Part 1.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Tale 2, Part 2.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Tale 3, Part 1.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Tale 3, Part 2.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Epilogue.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>

# Prologue

## Prologue Summary

This book for young people tells three stories of granted wishes that result in troublesome consequences for those who made them. As each story chronicles the increasingly negative results of actions taken impulsively, the book as a whole explores themes relating to the value of forgiveness and the importance of being able to tell illusion from reality.

### "The Strange Little Man"

The prologue, written in the first person, begins with a description of how the small rural community of Coven Tree has a history of experience with magic (see "Quotes", Prologue, p. 3). Witches, the narrator says in his chatty, informal way, have made their homes in the area for decades. The name of the town "comes from the huge twisted tree down at the crossroads where groups of witches ... used to meet." He also refers to how all kinds of "Satan's spawn" have appeared in the area, and how people have even claimed to see Satan. He also comments that most of the time, such evil types are easily recognized, but then refers to Thaddeus Blinn, saying he just looked like a funny little man.

At that point, the narrator comments that he'd better start telling the story "front to back" and introduces himself by his nickname, Stew Meat (see "Characters"). He also refers to three people who are part of the story he's about to tell (Polly, Rowena and Adam), adding that in his function as the town storekeeper, he hears all the stories of all the things that happen, which makes him the best person to tell the tale.

Stew Meat then sets the scene for the story's beginning, the Coven Tree Church Social, an annual event at which the people of Coven Tree share arts, crafts, and good times. At every social, Stew Meat says, there's a place for "outsiders" to set up a display booth, and it was there, he adds that he first encountered Thaddeus Blinn (see "Quotes", p. 7), whose rotting old tent advertised that he could give his customers whatever they wanted for fifty cents. Drawn by curiosity, intrigued by the fact that Blinn called him by name when they hadn't been introduced, and ignoring the strange light he seemed to see in Blinn's eyes, Stew Meat goes into the tent.

Inside, Stew Meat sees Blinn's other customers - insensitive Polly, romantic Rowena (with her dreams about traveling salesman Henry Piper), and hard-times farm boy Adam, - all of whom have, like Stew Meat, have paid their fifty cents and are waiting to be given what they want, somewhat impatiently. Blinn, himself impatient that he doesn't have more customers, calms down the ones he has and explains that he has the power to give them one wish - just one. All they have to do is press their thumb against the red spot on the card he gives them and speak their wish aloud. Adam begins to make his wish then and there, but Blinn stops him, saying they must choose their wish very



carefully. "For it will be granted," he says, "exactly as you ask for it." Adam comments that if it works, he'll be back for more cards. Blinn tells him that he passes down each road only once. With that, his four customers leave, and Stew Meat comments that he once again saw Blinn's eyes glow, and that none of them ever saw Blinn again.

Stew Meat then describes how he went back to his store and carefully put his card away, laughing at his foolishness and commenting that all four of Blinn's customers at least began to believe what he had to say .

## Prologue Analysis

In this first section, narration introduces the work's central characters and outlines the circumstances that give rise to the confrontations with desire that each of them eventually faces. In terms of the former, the character portrayals are quite vivid, each presented as having a strong sense of need and determination. This is particularly true of the three younger characters (Polly, Rowena and Adam) whose impulsive actions taken to meet their respective desires ultimately get them into trouble, but also of Thaddeus Blinn, whose determination to make a sale is the source of that trouble. Stew Meat is no less determined, but his purpose is of a different sort; he'll act on his curiosity, but only to a point. He is determined to watch and learn and consider before making any sort of decision or choice. In this, he is a clear, vivid, and most importantly, thematically relevant contrast to the three younger characters (see "Themes - The Dangers of Acting on Impulse"). There is also a clearly defined portrayal of the community where these characters live, Coven Tree coming across as rural, traditional, and conservative (see "Style - Setting" for additional commentary on the contribution of setting to the story's meaning and themes).

Other points to note about this section include its being written in the first person (see "Style - Point of View") and its reference to the name of the town (see "Objects/Places"). Finally, there are the work's references to Satan - first, to witches being connected to Satan (a perspective that might rub less conservative readers, who might perceive witches in the light of Wiccan, i.e. nature oriented, rather than Satanic, i.e. anti-nature practices, the wrong way), and second, to Blinn being affiliated with Satan. For further consideration of this aspect of the book, see "Topics for Discussion - As discussed in 'Themes' ..."



# Tale 1, Part 1

## Tale 1, Part 1 Summary

NB Each of the three tales is recounted from the third person narrative point of view.

"Jug-a-Rum", Chapter 1 - Polly plays by the side of the river with her friends, the twins Leland and Lenora, who are poor and generally unpopular, but who know the woods and the wildlife better than anyone else. When Polly finds a large bullfrog, whose croak sounds like the words "jug-a-rum," Leland's shout of excitement startles it into jumping into the river. Polly angrily berates him, but the twins fight back, at first throwing mud at her and later giving her the silent treatment. Polly apologizes, and the twins ask her to tell them about the Church Social, asking specifically about how the snobby Agatha and Eunice behaved. Polly defends both girls, saying they're rich and popular and she intends to be just like them. The twins tell her she's "fuzzy in the head," and leave. At home that night, Polly resolves to make friends with Agatha and Eunice no matter what, but the next day at church, her attempt to say hello to Agatha results in her tearing Agatha's dress. Agatha angrily humiliates her, and that night, Polly makes her wish (see "Quotes", p. 30). She is surprised to feel the red spot warming under her thumb and, after she drops it, to see it glowing like a hot coal. Outside, the bullfrogs cry "jug-a-rum."

"Jug-a-Rum", Chapter 2 - The next morning, after a restless night worrying about Agatha, Polly wakes in a bad mood. When she begins to complain to her mother about having to eat burned toast, she begins croaking like a frog ("jug-a-rum") instead of speaking words. Her mother quickly becomes exasperated with her and sends her off to school. On the way, she encounters Adam, but is only able to speak to him in croaks. He calls her "Froggy," and goes off. When she arrives at school, she sees Agatha and Eunice talking in a corner of the playground, gesturing to her. Meanwhile, Leland and Lenora come to say hello, becoming concerned when they realize Polly can only speak in frog croaks. Later, however, Polly's voice returns, and she speaks politely to the teacher. Throughout most of the day, because she is so fearful of croaking instead of talking, she remains quiet and learns that her teacher, Miss Morasco, is happy that she's being so polite. But when Agatha makes a mean comment about her, her temper gets the better of her and as she's beginning to speak as sharply as she usually does, the words again turn to croaking. Her classmates laugh at her, Miss Morasco sends her home, and her mother sends her to bed with a cup of tea. Later, her voice returns and when Leland and Lenora come to visit, she tells them she's cured. They warn her to be careful, since the coming and going of the croaks is unpredictable. They also warn her that Agatha and Eunice are planning something to get even with her for ripping Agatha's dress. That night, Polly's tearful attempts to get some sleep are disturbed by what sounds like hundreds of frogs croaking outside her window.



## Tale 1, Part 1 Analysis

In this, the first of the three main "Tales of Coven Tree," the author defines a narrative and/or structural pattern repeated in each story. The central character experiences a particularly challenging confrontation with his / her inability to achieve a driving desire, impulsively uses the wishing card s/he purchased from Thaddeus Blinn, and begins to suffer the consequences of that impulse. In this context, structure and theme can be seen to interrelate, the principle of cause and effect (i.e. this action causing that reaction causing this action, and so on and so on) coming into play in order to reinforce the work's central thematic contention that blindly following impulse is dangerous.

Another pattern introduced here that repeats in each of the three tales is the idea that the reader is a step ahead of the central character. In each story, as soon as its central character makes his or her wish in the way that s/he does and under the circumstances that s/he does, the reader can see the trouble ahead (see "Topics for Discussion - Examine the wishes made ...")

Finally, each of the three "tales" in this collection is, essentially, a fable - that is, a story that illustrates a particular moral lesson or aspect of everyday existence. In other words, the story is told with the specific purpose of teaching the reader. While the three tales have lessons in common (see "Themes"), each has its own individual teaching to impart. For further consideration of this aspect of the work, see "Topics for Discussion - What is the individual moral teaching, or lesson ..."



# Tale 1, Part 2

## Tale 1, Part 2 Summary

"Jug-a-Rum", Chapter 3 - Polly wakes very early the next morning, worried about what is going to come out of her mouth that day (see "Quotes", p. 45). When she tests her voice, however, she finds that she can speak real words and later, on her way to school and for most of the first part of classes, she is so careful to be polite that she doesn't croak at all. Meanwhile, Leland and Lenora say they saw Rowena out in the forest talking to the trees. Later, at recess, two boys anger Polly so much that she loses her temper and speaks sharply to them, but suddenly lapses into croaking. Before it can get worse, though, Leland and Lenora pull her to one side, and Lenora offers an idea - that Polly only croaks when she loses her temper. Polly realizes she's getting her wish, but not in the way she wanted - people really are paying attention to her, but for all the wrong reasons, and smiling at her; only they're laughing at the sounds she's making. She begins to worry about what the final part of her wish (being invited to Agatha's house) will bring, and resolves to do her best to head off possible humiliation by apologizing. Later, at Stew Meat's store, she overhears Agatha and Eunice discussing her condition and their plans to humiliate her, starting with inviting her to Agatha's house. Polly almost resolves not to go, but then decides to prove to them that no matter what they say or do, she can and will behave like a real lady. So, when Agatha and Eunice issue an invitation, Polly accepts.

"Jug-a-Rum", Chapter 4 - The next day, Polly is so determined to avoid making her croaking noises that she is polite to everyone she meets, particularly her classmates. They, in turn, are surprised and eventually happy at the change in her, and she spends time at recess playing with many of them for the first time. Only Agatha and Eunice continue to keep their distance. The next day, Polly dresses extra carefully for her tea and, after school, accompanies Agatha and Eunice to Agatha's home, where Mrs. Benthorn seems surprised and resentful to see her, but accepts Polly's carefully gracious apology. Over tea and cookies, Agatha and Eunice repeatedly attempt to tease Polly into losing her temper, but Polly remains completely calm. Conversation eventually turns to what the three girls do after school and Polly's stories of the fun she has with Leland and Lenora are met with disgust from the other two. They, in turn, talk about their piano lessons and French lessons, and Polly realizes how much of a mistake she's made in desiring their friendship at the expense of her relationship with Leland and Lenora as well as the potential friendships of others in her class. She soon excuses herself from tea, telling Mrs. Benthorn as she leaves that she hopes to never grow into the kind of "ladies" Agatha and Eunice are pretending to be. Later, out in the woods, she shouts out her anger and resentment of the two girls, her words turning to croaks. Narration comments, however, that she doesn't mind; she feels happier and freer than she ever has. Later, however, she worries that she is trapped with this curse for life, and wonders how she can ever get rid of it. She also wonders whether Rowena talking to trees is the result of HER wish, and whether there is "anyone with enough ... cleverness



and common sense" to help her. She then has an idea, and starts running into Coven Tree.

## Tale 1, Part 2 Analysis

The first point to note about this section of Polly's story is how it introduces another structural element underlying the work as a whole - the sense and/or hint that while Polly is struggling with the consequences of her wish, Rowena is also struggling with hers (see "Style - Structure"). In the same way as the structural pattern within each story reinforces their common central themes (see "Themes"), the sense that all three young people are having parallel physical challenges (Polly's croaking, Rowena's encountering the true Henry, Adam's struggle with overwhelming water) reinforces the idea that they are encountering parallel MORAL challenges as well.

The second point to note is how yet another element common to all three stories continues to manifest. This is the idea that in each story, characters with negative attributes are clearly and vividly contrasted with characters who have opposite, more positive attributes. For further consideration of this aspect of the work, see "Topics for Discussion - In each of the three main stories ..."

Finally, the story's concluding moments constitute the introduction of still another element common to all three tales. This is the idea that, once the central character in each story (in this case, Polly) has come to a realization of the truth about his / her situation, s/he not only feels helpless, but comes to a second realization - that there is a way out of that situation. There are two points to note here. First, the reader is, in all likelihood, once again ahead of the characters, in that Polly's destination at the end of her tale, and eventually of both Rowena and Adam at the end of their tales. is pretty obvious, if it wasn't already so at the end of the Prologue. At that point Stew Meat, in his narration, makes it very clear that he is not using his wish card until he knows exactly the right thing to wish for and the right way to wish. In short, Polly, Rowena and Adam, at the end of their respective stories, realize that Stew Meat is their only hope - or, to put it in thematic terms, the only way out of the consequences of both desire and impulse is prudence, as represented by Stew Meat (see "Themes - The Dangers of Acting on Impulse"). The second, and related, point to note about the ending of each story and the resolution of the situations of the three central characters is somewhat paradoxical. While each of their stories incorporates an element of accepting personal responsibility for one's actions, the resolution of each of their situations hands responsibility over to someone else. This, it could be argued, undermines what appears to be one of the work's key thematic points about the taking of personal responsibility for oneself and one's actions - see "Topics for Discussion - Do you think that Stew Meat ..."





# Tale 2, Part 1

## Tale 2, Part 1 Summary

"The Tree Man", Chapter 1 - Narration describes how Rowena, after leaving the Church Social, put her card with the red dot in a special hiding place and how she noticed that, on her calendar, she had marked that Henry Piper would be in town the next day. She goes downstairs to ask her mother for a favor, but at first is reluctant to do so when she realizes that the family's hired hand, Sam Waxman, is also there. Mrs. Jervis insists that Rowena go ahead and ask her question, and Rowena suggests that Henry stay with them rather than at the boarding house. At that, Sam starts laughing and mocking both Rowena (for being so in love with Henry) and Henry (for being both pretentious and manipulative). Rowena loses her temper and starts arguing with him, but Mrs. Jervis puts a stop to it by saying Henry is NOT staying there. Rowena goes upstairs, remembering the card given her by Blinn, takes it out of its hiding place and puts it in the pocket of her best dress, ready for when Henry is there... just in case. The next day, Henry arrives and charms Rowena in spite of Sam's pointed comments. Later, after spending the day talking to Mr. Jervis about machinery, Henry spends some time on the family's front porch with Rowena, continuing to charm her and resisting her attempts to get him to spend more time with her. After he goes, Rowena, who is wearing her best dress, takes out the card and makes her wish (see "Quotes", p. 85). She too feels the spot grow warm under her thumb, and shortly afterwards hears a rustling sound coming from the woods near her house. She goes to investigate and discovers Henry unsuccessfully attempting to pull his stuck foot out of the ground.

"The Tree Man", Chapter 2 - Rowena tries to help the increasingly angry Henry to move, but is unsuccessful. She says she wants to get help from her father, but Henry refuses to let her saying everyone will laugh at him. He complains about getting cold and then about the horse blanket Rowena fetches for him from the barn, since he won't let her go into the house, saying it's too smelly. Eventually, Rowena goes into the house, worried sick about what happened. The next morning, she takes Henry a doughnut for breakfast, but he complains about the good food he would have been eating at the boarding house, adding that he feels like he's been eating already, only his food's come up through the ground. He also says he's unable to move from the waist down. Rowena hurries off to school and is barely able to concentrate on her work. When she gets home, Mrs. Jervis tells her that she'd heard that Polly Kemp started croaking like a frog and starts wondering about what happened in Blinn's tent. Rowena then goes outside to see Henry, who is becoming increasingly stiff and also less able to speak clearly. She tries to pry him from the ground, becoming confused by and resentful of his increasingly nasty orders. They are discovered by Sam who, in his attempts to dig Henry out, discovers that Henry has not only sprouted roots from his feet, but has started to grow bark up his legs. Rowena, hearing the word "roots," suddenly connects what has happened to Henry with her wish and starts to cry.



## Tale 2, Part 1 Analysis

As the second "tale" unfolds, the reader can clearly see the many parallels with Polly's story. These include structure (a character's dreams obstructed, an impulsive wish to remove that obstruction, unforeseen consequences of that wish), character (different characters with contrasting positive/negative attributes) and reader foresight (realizing the dangers of the wish ahead of the character making it). The narrative parallel (events in the three stories occurring at the same time) is also reinforced with the reference made by Mrs. Jervis to Polly's strange behavior, as are the various parallel themes (the dangers of acting on impulse, the dangers of buying too deeply into illusion). All that said, there is a parallel between the stories of Rowena and Polly that doesn't manifest in Adam's story. This is the sense that in the stories of the two girls, their wishes are made for essentially selfish reasons. They want something for themselves - Polly wants popularity and friends, Rowena wants Henry to stay in Coven Tree and marry her. Adam, by contrast, makes a more selfless wish, one that benefits others as much as himself, if not more so. Specifically, he wishes for water for his family farm (see "Characters - Adam"). Some readers might see this aspect of the work as being somewhat misogynistic (i.e. portraying a negative perspective on women in general), or as a manifestation of a possibly stereotypical difference between the sexes (i.e. women are more interested in relationships, men are more interested in property, possessions and/or material prosperity). For further consideration of this question, see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss whether the types of wishes ..."



## Tale 2, Part 2

### Tale 2, Part 2 Summary

"The Tree Man", Chapter 3 - Narration of this chapter begins with the end of Rowena's telling Sam and Henry what happened with the card and the wish. While Rowena wonders whether Polly is also having trouble as a result of making a wish, Henry angrily urges her to focus on him and Sam wonders what they're going to do, saying they're dealing with magic. Rowena suggests looking for Blinn, but Sam says he's probably long gone and that because Rowena made the wish, it's up to her to break it. He also says they should make Henry more comfortable and suggests that they pull up the weeds around him. As they start pulling, Sam discovers Henry's briefcase, which Henry says is full of catalogs and order forms. Sam takes it to the barn to keep it safe and dry, leaving Rowena to keep pulling weeds. As she does so, Henry complains about what she's doing and orders her around. Eventually Rowena loses her temper, asking how he can speak to her so sharply when he used to say such nice, loving things to her. Henry says he only said what he did to get her to say good things about him to her father so he'd buy more machinery. Rowena becomes even more determined to set him free, if only so she can see him get on a train and leave her life forever. Sam returns and as he's feeding a grateful Henry some fertilizer, Rowena tells him what she has learned about Henry. Sam says he always knew that truth, adding that she had to find it out for herself. The next day, Mrs. Jervis reminds Rowena of a party they had been invited to that night. Rowena realizes that she won't be able to go, because she has to take care of Henry. Sam, however, volunteers to stay behind instead. At the party, Rowena overhears a couple of girls talking about water suddenly appearing on Adam Fiske's farm, thinking to herself that if Adam wished for water, at least he was getting something useful. Late that night, when Rowena returns home, she finds Sam waiting for her. He shows her how serious Henry's condition is; he is almost entirely covered with bark and his arms are now branches. He still has a face, though, and is able to mouth the words "help me."

"The Tree Man", Chapter 4 - By the afternoon of the next day (the same day that Polly is having tea with Agatha and Eunice), Henry "was just a runty sycamore standing in the midst of the grove of trees." As Rowena worries about what she's going to do, she realizes how much she's come to rely on Sam (see "Quotes", p. 112) and also realizes he's been gone from the farm all day. That night, when she and Sam are finally able to talk, he reveals that he's been in the library researching magic in general and the specific spell Henry is under in particular, adding that he's had no luck finding any answers. He also reveals that he's called Henry's company and said Henry is sick, so they're not expecting him back. When Rowena talks about how foolish she's been, Sam comforts her by explaining that all Henry's stories about travel to faraway places were made up, based on the travel magazines in his briefcase. Rowena again becomes angry with Henry, and again with herself, saying there must be away to change Henry back. Suddenly she realizes that there were other cards handed out that day in Blinn's tent and formulates a plan. When she asks Sam to go with her to put it into action, he



says she's got to solve the situation herself. She asks him to wait up for her until she comes back. Narration describes how before he responds, Sam smiles at her (see "Quotes", p. 121), and then says that he's "already been waiting for you a long time. But until now, you only had eyes for Henry Piper. Yes, Rowena, I'll wait. Take all the time you need. And when you're ready for me, you'll find me waiting still."

## Tale 2, Part 2 Analysis

While this tale develops the thematic, structural, and character-based parallels between all three stories even further, it simultaneously becomes something quite different from the other two. In short, it's also a love story, revealing and exploring the love that Sam has long had for Rowena, and the love that Rowena discovers for Sam. The basic experience parallels one in Polly's story; in the same way as Polly discovers the depth of her friendship with the twins, Rowena discovers the depth of her feelings for Sam and, it could be argued, in the same way as Adam discovers the depth of his father's feelings for him. The fact remains, however, that it's a different SORT of feeling or, at least, contemporary culture has been, and is, conditioned to accept and/or believe that they are different sorts of feeling ... that romantic love is a different sort of love from any other kind (i.e. friendship, parental). Ultimately, it could be argued, they are all the same - that ultimately, feelings of connection, trust, respect and affection are the same, and have the same results, no matter what sort of relationship triggers them.

Other important elements in this section include the reference to Henry's briefcase in Chapter 3, which foreshadows Sam's revelation in Chapter 4 of what the briefcase contains. A second, and related, important element has to do with what the briefcase and its contents represent, with the briefcase being a metaphoric / symbolic representation of surface and/or illusion, and the magazines it contains being a similarly metaphoric representation of truths concealed by illusion (see "Themes - The Dangers of Illusion"). Finally, there is Sam's quiet assurance to Rowena that no matter how long she takes, he will be waiting for her. Aside from its innate romanticism, the statement can also be seen as a manifestation of the work's thematic consideration of impulse - or rather, of impulse's opposite, patience and restraint. Here, Sam can be seen as being similar in both personal character and narrative function to Stew Meat, in that both characters, in their patience and wisdom, provide important and thematically defining contrast to the dangerously impulsive, or impulsively dangerous, choices made by the central characters of the three "tales" (see "Themes - The Dangers of Acting on Impulse").



# Tale 3, Part 1

## Tale 3, Part 1 Summary

"Water, Water, Everywhere", Chapter 1 - The morning after returning from the church social after having hung his pants in the closet with Blinn's card still in the pocket, Adam is unhappy to hear that the well on his family's farm has gone dry again, and that he has to go and haul water from the river. He mentions the possibility of getting water from the spring on a neighboring farm, but his Pa angrily refuses (see "Quotes", p. 126), saying that a dowser named Uncle Poot (see "Quotes", p. 131) is going to be in the neighborhood and will help them find water. Adam doubts that dowsing really works and remains convinced that "he'd be hauling water ... for the rest of his life." The next day is a school day, the day Adam encounters the croaking Polly on the road (see "Jug-a-rum", Chapter 2) and, in class, sits behind a nervous Rowena, who seems to be muttering about someone's feet being stuck. After school, he goes home, harnesses the horses to the wagon, fills it with iron tubs, and drives through town to the river, enduring the taunts and ridicule of the townspeople, including Agatha and Eunice, along the way. He works hard filling the tubs and then drives home, again putting up with the taunting of the townspeople. At one point, he hits a rock and a lot of the water spills, upsetting him even more. When he gets home, he sees that Uncle Poot has arrived (see "Quotes", p. 131), but is unable to find water. That night, after promising his ma to help her set up a flower garden and haul extra water for her, Adam angrily thinks to himself about how unfair the family's situation is. But then he remembers Blinn's promise and the card. He gets it out of his pants pocket and makes his wish (see "Quotes", p. 134-5). He, like Polly and Rowena, feels the red dot grow warm under his thumb and drops the card to the floor. He then looks out his window and is disappointed to see there is no water.

"Water, Water, Everywhere", Chapter 2 - The next morning, Adam is even more disappointed when there is no sign of water anywhere in the yard. Recalling he has no school until exams start the following week, he sets out digging fenceposts for his mother's garden. At one point, he decides to try Uncle Poot's dowsing stick becoming surprised and frightened when it points straight down. He tries again and again and, each time, the stick shows water below. He tries to convince his mother of what he's found, but she thinks the heat is getting to him and orders him inside to rest. A few minutes later, though, both Adam and his mother are surprised when it seems to be raining, even more surprised when water starts gushing from the fencepost holes Adam had dug, and even more surprised yet when Pa hurries home from the cornfield with news that he too had dug a hole that had released water. Narration describes how by that evening, the fields had all been watered, the well and cistern had been filled, and runoff had to be channeled. That night, in bed, Adam happily contemplates never having to haul water again. "Everything seemed just about as perfect as it could be."



## Tale 3, Part 1 Analysis

Several times throughout this story, the narrative refers to the process of "dowsing." Dowsing is the name given to what might be described as a traditional rural and/or folk practice, a natural or spiritual process of finding water beneath the surface of land. The process involves the dowser, or water seeker, holding the two top ends of a Y-shaped stick in his/her hands, walking across the land in question, and waiting for the bottom end to point downwards towards the water. Dowsers are said to have a particular gift and/or talent for the practice, a gift that, as Stew Meat reveals in his epilogue, Adam is eventually discovered to have.

Other important elements to note about this section have been previously discussed. These include the difference between Adam's wish (i.e. selfless, for the good of others) and those of the two girls (i.e. selfish, for their own personal good), a difference discussed further in "Characters - Adam." There are also the various parallels between the three stories, although some of the basic patterns are altered slightly here. For example, the structural pattern (desperate desire followed by impulsive action followed by negative consequences) is varied slightly, in that Adam and his family first experience a brief period of positive consequences. The negative consequences follow in the next two chapters. Then there is the pattern of mirrored characters (i.e. characters with negative characteristics mirrored and/or contrasted by those with positive ones), in that the negative characters in this story play a much less important role than the negative characters in the other two stories (see "Topics for Discussion - In each of the three main stories ..."). Finally, there are the book's central thematic patterns, one of which (the dangers of acting on impulse) is clearly in play here, while the third major theme, the value of forgiveness, manifests more clearly in this story (in the following section) than it does in either of the other two. The second major theme, exploring the dangers of buying into illusion seems, on first glance, to be almost entirely absent from this story. This is because the value of water in Adam's life is far more real than the perceived value of Agatha's friendship is in Polly's, or the perceived value of Henry's love is in Rowena's. On the other hand, and as is discussed in the analysis of the following section, there is the possibility of another sort of illusion manifesting in this story, the sudden influx of water serving to almost literally wash it away.





## Tale 3, Part 2

### Tale 3, Part 2 Summary

"Water, Water, Everywhere", Chapter 3 - Adam wakes from a water-soaked dream to find that a leak has opened up in the ceiling. After setting a bucket to catch the water, he goes down for breakfast, only to learn from Ma that the water has been flowing all night, and that Pa is down in the barn trying to minimize the damage there. Adam goes to help and, while assisting Pa, learns that because the farm is situated in a small valley, if the water doesn't stop flowing, the entire farm is going to be flooded out and they're going to have to move. After a hard morning's work salvaging whatever they can, Pa rests while Adam talks with a group of townspeople who have come out to see what's happening. One of them jokingly refers to the situation as being caused by magic, and Adam suddenly and guiltily remembers his wish. After the townspeople have left, Adam and his parents helplessly watch as the water fills the valley. "They all knew the farm was as good as lost," narration comments. "But nobody wanted to talk about it." At suppertime, Adam attempts to tell his parents about his wish, but is told to be quiet by his angry mother. After going to bed, Adam hears a new sound, and a few moments later is told by Pa that water is coming in the basement, and that tomorrow they'll have to move out.

"Water, Water, Everywhere", Chapter 4 - The next morning (the same morning as Rowena discovers that Henry has become a tree and Polly has tea with Agatha and Eunice), Adam wakes up and discovers that the house is completely surrounded by water. He goes downstairs and discovers that the kitchen roof is now leaking badly, and that Ma is stubbornly making breakfast at the big cookstove. While she's cooking, Pa turns up, having made a raft out of some barrels and wood from the destroyed hen house. He makes jokes about the raft being a big ship, and then gets Adam to help him load up furniture to take to higher ground. After several trips, all that's left is the cast-iron cookstove, which they manage to load onto the raft just before the water from the cellar starts coming up through the main floor. The stove proves too heavy for the raft, which breaks up, sending Adam, Pa and the stove into waist high water. The rest of the family's belongings are safe and dry, however, and the people of Coven Tree soon show up with wagons and food to offer help. The proud Pa, however, turns them all away, saying they'll manage somehow. Later, Adam finally confesses the wish he had made, expecting his father to be angry. Pa, however, is not angry at all (see "Quotes", p. 167-8). The relieved Adam notices lights going on at four neighboring farms, suddenly remembers the four magic cards handed out by Blinn and, like Polly and Rowena, sets off at a run for town.

### Tale 3, Part 2 Analysis

As previously discussed, the book's thematic focus on the dangers of buying into illusion can, at first glance, seem to be less apparent in this story than in the others. In this section, however, it becomes apparent that there is in fact a very powerful form of



illusion at work in Adam's life, and indeed in the life of his family. This is the illusion of possession or, more specifically, of pride in possession. Several times throughout the narrative, there are references to both Adam and his father taking pride in their land and in their independence, and to their acting as they do out of that pride. The sudden, overwhelming influx of water on that land, however, suggests to both the characters and the reader that such a pride is temporary at best. In other words, the events of this story and their consequences suggest that possession is ultimately as much of an illusion as Agatha's status is for Polly and Henry's love is for Rowena. This combines with the immediate, compassionate, and unconditional forgiveness he receives from his father to suggest that, like Polly and Rowena before him, Adam discovers that once illusion has been cleared away, the true value of relationship and connection can, and will, emerge.

Meanwhile, Adam's actions at the end of his story draw the reader forward into what has surely become an inevitability - the ultimate encounter between impatient impulse, as manifest in the actions of the three young people, and patient prudence, as manifest in the actions of Stew Meat, about to be revealed in the forthcoming epilogue.





# Epilogue

## Epilogue Summary

"At Stew Meat's Store" - The epilogue, once again written in the first person narrative voice of Stew Meat, describes how, just as he's closing up his shop for the night, he's visited by Polly, Rowena and Adam, all of whom are desperate for him to use his wish card to rid them of their troubles. At one point, Polly's desperation gets the better of her and she starts speaking sharply, triggering her croaking. When Stew Meat sees the trouble she's genuinely in, he realizes that all three of the "young'uns" are in a bad place, gets out his wish card, and makes his wish (see "Quotes", p. 176). He feels the red spot grow warm beneath his thumb, and a moment later they all realize that Polly can speak normally again. Stew Meat comments, in narration, that at about the same time, Rowena's parents investigated a strange sound in the woods and found one of Henry Piper's order forms with no trace of Henry, while Adam's Pa and Ma realized the water had stopped gushing from the wells on their farm.

Stew Meat then narrates what happened afterwards. Polly got into the habit of speaking politely to people, although every once in a while she still spoke sharply to people who particularly irritated her. Rowena started spending more time with Sam, holding hands with him and stitching him a quilt. Adam's family's farm, meanwhile, was never any good as farmland once the water all went away, but it turns out that Adam did genuinely have the gift for dowsing and went into a very successful business with Uncle Poot. The money he made, Stew Meat comments, helped pay for a new farm.

Finally, Stew Meat urges the reader to beware of Thaddeus Blinn and his promises ... and his eyes.

## Epilogue Analysis

While each of the three main "tales" has its own climax (i.e. point of highest emotional and/or narrative intensity), the climax of the book as a whole takes place in this section. Here, the unresolved tensions in the characters' respective situations have been layered in the same way as their physical experiences and enactment of the work's thematic statements, the one building upon the other. As previously discussed, Stew Meat's actions here are essentially a triumph of patience and wisdom over desire and irresponsibility, a circumstance that embodies the work's central thematic contention about the dangers of impulsive action. Further support for this and all three of the work's major thematic contentions can be found in Stew Meat's commentary on the lives of the three central characters in the aftermath of their experiences; prosperity, personal and material, will result if the power and danger of impulse is denied and/or redirected. Even further support can be found in the narrative's final moments, in which the reference to Blinn and his eyes can be seen as a metaphoric reference to the dangerous allure of quick fixes, easy solutions, and the "too good to be true."



# Characters

## Polly Kemp appears in All Sections

Eleven year old Polly is the central character in the first of the three "Tales ..." At the beginning of her story, she is portrayed as sharp-tongued and insensitive, quick tempered and at times quite nasty. In his narration, Stew Meat makes a point of saying she's not "downright mean," she's just not very sensitive to how her words might be hurtful to other people - in particular, to people who clearly care for her, her mother and her friends, the outspoken twins Lenora and Leland. She is also, in her story's early stages, portrayed as being desperate for the friendship of two girls in school (Agatha and Eunice - see below) whom she perceives as being "quality folks," and as being equally desperate to be like them, wealthy and successful. As the result of her wish, she not only learns the value of being pleasant, respectful and complimentary to people, she also discovers something important about the lives of the girls she wants to emulate. She realizes that the lives of Agatha and Eunice are, in fact, quite empty and dull when compared to the rich life she both already has, particularly with Lenora and Leland, and has the potential to have with the people who respond to her compliments and seem to like her as she is. In this context, Polly (like Rowena - see below) can be seen as embodying and/or manifesting one of the book's primary themes - specifically, its emphasis on appreciating reality over superficiality and pretense.

## Rowena Jervis appears in All Sections

Fifteen year old Rowena is the central character in the second of the book's three "Tales ..." In Stew Meat's narration, she is described as "giddy" and "in love with love itself," focusing her fantasies and attention on Henry Piper, a smooth-talking traveling salesman of farm machinery. She is unrealistic and driven by fantasy, the first of many ways in which she and Polly share both characteristics and experiences. Another example - like Polly, Rowena is desperate to be liked and appreciated by someone (Piper) whom she ultimately realizes is not worthy of her, although in Rowena's case, she was at least partly convinced that her regard was reciprocated; Polly has no illusions that Agatha and Eunice care for her at all. Also like Polly, Rowena comes to realize the value of a friendship, or at least the regard, of someone who has thought positively of her all along. In Polly's case it's the twins; in Rowena's case it's the farmhand, Sam Waxman. Finally, and again like Polly, Rowena's story can be seen as manifesting the book's central thematic consideration relating to the value of reality over lies and manipulation. Rowena, with the support, insight and wisdom of Sam Waxman, realizes just how false and calculating Henry Piper is and abandons her dreams of a life with him. Unlike Polly, however, Rowena realizes fairly early in her story the amount of responsibility she bears for her circumstances, not only in terms of having brought the situation about through her wish, but also in terms of how blind to reality her illusions have made her.



## Adam Fiske appears in All Sections

Sixteen year old Adam is the central character in the third of the book's three "Tales ...". He is, in many ways, very different from the other two central characters, Polly and Rowena. Where the first two are initially portrayed as selfless and irresponsible, Adam is portrayed as steady and conscientious. He, it must be noted, makes a wish that he believes would benefit not only himself, while Polly and Rowena's wishes are made from fundamentally selfish desires, but also his family. He is also different from the girls in that he is not taken in by others. While Polly and Rowena are fooled by the manipulative appearances of their classmates (in the case of the former) and the traveling salesman (in the case of the latter), Adam is very aware of the strengths, weaknesses, and truths in the lives of both his parents. Finally, when his wish goes wrong, Adam is very sensitive to how others are affected by his wish. Neither Polly nor Rowena are particularly worried about how other people are being affected by the negative effects of what they have done. Even Rowena, whose wish has turned another person into a tree, is more concerned about having been manipulated by that person, rather than with how that person might be suffering. Adam, by contrast, is fully and painfully aware of the suffering his wish has brought into the lives of his hard working parents. This means that, ultimately, his story is less a warning about the dangers of foolishness than are the stories of both Polly and Rowena.

## Stew Meat

Stew Meat, who in the Prologue gives his real name as Stewart Meade, is the narrator of the Prologue and Epilogue and the key figure in the resolution of the troubles that change the lives and perspectives of the three central characters (Polly, Rowena and Adam). He is also, ostensibly, the narrator of the three tales that make up the main body of the book, although the author has shaped the writing of those tales differently from that in the Prologue and Epilogue (see "Style - Point of View"). Stew Meat is an older man (narration never specifically indicates how old), wise and watchful but, at the same time, curious and so vulnerable to a good sales pitch that he disregards his instincts to be careful around Thaddeus Blinn. He comes across as fairly conservative and traditional in his values and perspectives, in particular referring to witches and their activities as being directly related to and/or defined by the presence of Satan.

## Thaddeus Blinn

Traveling salesman Thaddeus Blinn is described, in Stew Meat's narration, as initially appearing inoffensive and perhaps a bit foolish, but is eventually revealed to be manipulative and, in Stew Meat's perspective, ultimately evil. In this, he is another embodiment of the book's thematic perspective on the dangers of being taken in by illusion (see "Themes").



## **Leland and Lenora Wickstaff**

Twins Leland and Lenora appear primarily in Polly's story, "Jug-a-rum." They are portrayed as poor but outdoorsy and fun, sharp tongued but compassionate, wise but intolerant of bad behavior. As Polly eventually comes to realize, they are her true friends, key sources of support and wisdom who, even before she makes her wish, strive to help her realize the risks associated with being too sharp tongued and / or hot tempered.

## **Agatha Benthorn and Eunice Ingersoll appears in All Sections**

Agatha and Eunice are the two snobby rich girls at Polly's school whom she initially is desperate to emulate, but who eventually reveal themselves as superficial, nasty and pretentious. They, like Thaddeus Blinn, are embodiments of the dangers associated with buying into illusion and false dreams.

## **Mrs. Kemp, Miss Morasco**

Mrs. Kemp is Polly's widowed mother, hard-working and tolerant, perhaps too much so, of her daughter's initial attitudes. Miss Morasco is Polly's teacher, patient and sensitive, outspoken with both her compliments and her criticism.

## **Mr. and Mrs. Jervis**

Mr. and Mrs. Jervis are Rowena's parents. Mr. Jervis is a farmer, the target of Henry Piper's sales pitches. His business is the reason why Henry courts Rowena so charmingly; Piper thinks that if Rowena thinks well of him, she'll sway her father's opinion. Mrs. Jervis, by contrast, is not taken in at all by Henry's charm and has no patience whatsoever for Rowena's dreaminess about him. She can be seen as a narrative representation of the wisdom and/or value of being wary of what seems superficial and charming - in other words, wary of the kind of illusion that so many of the other characters become troubled by.

## **Sam Waxman, Henry Piper**

These two characters are, essentially, rivals for Rowena's affection. Sam is the hard-working, respectful, wise and patient farm hand whom she eventually comes to love, while Henry is the glib, superficially charming, manipulative traveling salesman with whom she is initially infatuated. Over the course of the story in which Rowena is the central character, she comes to realize the value of the former (i.e. someone who lives a life of honesty, without illusion) over the latter (i.e. someone who lives a life DEFINED by illusion).



## Adam's Pa and Ma

Adam's parents are portrayed as hard working and proud, quirky and essentially wise, and ultimately very close to their son, very loving. In particular, Pa's compassion, wisdom and forgiveness at the close of Adam's story can be seen as an embodiment of the narrative's thematically central contention that honest insight and affection can, and will, have much more important and lasting impact on a person's life than the superficial appeal of quick fix artists like Thaddeus Blinn.

## Uncle Poot

Uncle Poot is a dowser (see "Quotes", p. 131 - also "Objects/Places - Dowsing"), brought to the Fisk farm in an effort to find water. His failed attempt is a factor in Adam's decision to wish for there to be water "all over" the farm, and also in Adam's decision (as revealed in the Epilogue) to both explore and make a living at his own talents as a dowser.



# Objects/Places

## Coven Tree appears in All Sections

Coven Tree is the name of the town around and within which the action of the book is centered. The name is significant for two reasons. First, in the story, the name comes from the gnarled old tree around which "covens" (groups) of witches gathered. Second, the name is reminiscent of that of Coventry, a city in England with a large, centuries old cathedral first constructed in the 1400's that was mostly destroyed by bombings in World War II. It may be, in fact, that the destruction of the cathedral by the Nazis, a military empire held by many to be the 20th century embodiment of evil, can be seen as a metaphor for the evil brought to Coven Tree by Thaddeus Blinn.

## The Church Social

This is the yearly community event at which Stew Meat and the three young people (Polly, Rowena and Adam) each encounter Thaddeus Blinn.

## Blinn's Tent

Blinn's rotting, mildewy tent (its condition perhaps a metaphor for what Stew Meat sees as the rotting evil in Blinn's actions) is pitched outside the main site for the social, a situation perhaps evocative of Blinn's magic existing "outside" the realm of what is normal and genuine.

## The Magic Cards appears in All Sections

Blinn gives each of the four main characters a card that he describes as magic - a plain white business card with a red dot in the middle. He tells them that the card, when used in a specific way (i.e. by placing a thumb over the card and speaking a wish out loud) has the power to grant its owner whatever she or he desires. Each of the main characters uses his or her card in the way Blinn describes, feels the red spot become warm under their thumbs, and drops the card to the ground, instinctively responding to the magic or evil its use triggers.

## Stew Meat's Store

Stew Meat runs a general store in Coven Tree, a place where the townspeople meet and talk and socialize. Polly overhears an important conversation between Agatha and Eunice in the store, but the most important event that takes place here is the scene in the "Epilogue" where the three young people (Polly, Rowena and Adam) explain what



happened when they made their wishes and ask Stew Meat to free them from the consequences of those wishes by using HIS.

## **The Elementary School**

This is the setting for a great deal of the action of Polly's story, "Jug-a-rum." Both the classroom and the playground are the setting for many of Polly's more embarrassing and illuminating experiences of magically being made to croak like a frog when she's angry.

## **Agatha's House**

Agatha's house, much like Agatha herself, is an ideal for Polly. To her, being invited to that large, expensive house for tea is a sign of accomplishment and acceptance. She later learns that the house, again like Agatha herself, is unwelcoming and unfriendly, not nearly as much fun to visit and/or play in as the more natural, freer places (i.e. the riverside) where she plays with her true friends.

## **The Jervis' Farm**

Rowena and her parents live on a farm outside of Coven Tree. The woods near the farm are the setting for Henry Piper's transformation into a tree, and for Rowena's discovery of what he is truly like.

## **Henry Piper's Briefcase**

When Henry's feet begin to sprout roots as part of his transformation into a tree, he drops his briefcase, which Sam Waxman later finds and removes to the barn for safekeeping. Sam eventually opens it and discovers that it is full of travel magazines that, he deduces, Henry has used as fodder for the stories he told Rowena in his efforts to charm her.

## **The Fiske Farm**

Adam and his parents live on a farm that his proud father worked hard and long to afford, but which is unproductive because it lacks a ready water supply. Adam's wish for just such a supply turns the farm into a lake. After the wish is revoked and the water subsides, the farm returns to its usual dry state, and Adam and his family move to a more productive plot of land.





# Themes

## The Dangers of Illusion / Appreciating Reality

The narratives of the first two "tales" in the book ("Jug-a-rum" and "The Tree Man"), as well as commentary and incidents in the "Epilogue" and the "Prologue," are defined by an exploration of this central theme - the idea that, in essence, what looks too good to be true very often is (see also "Style - Point of View"). It's important to note, however, that the various illusions or apparent perfections (Blinn's, Piper's, Agatha and Eunice's) portrayed in the book often conceal not only the truth of the person and/or situation PRESENTING perfection, but also truth within the person PERCEIVING perfection.

This is true of both Polly and Rowena who, once they rid themselves of their beliefs in the illusions presented to them, discover truths about themselves and their feelings. In Polly's case, she perceives her true feelings towards her friends and the interests/ joys she shares with them. In Rowena's case, she perceives not only the true feelings of the boy whom she has hitherto reviled, but also her own true feelings towards him. In Adam's case, initial impressions of his story might suggest that he doesn't have the same sort of problem with buying into illusion that the girls do; he does, as narration clearly indicates, have clear understanding of, and insight into, the ways of his mother. But upon further consideration, and when the reader considers the reaction of Adam's Pa to his confession of responsibility for the flood, it becomes clear that Adam, for whatever reason and to whatever degree, has developed the illusion that his father is to be feared. Pa's compassionate and wise reaction can, in that context, be seen as a mirror image of the actions taken by Agatha, Eunice and Henry. Where the truth they revealed had been unpalatable, the truth Pa reveals is affirming and graceful. All these truths perform the same function - to trigger awareness in the three young protagonists that reality, in whatever form it takes, is to be appreciated.

## The Dangers of Acting on Impulse

The three central characters (Polly, Rowena and Adam) in the book's three tales each create difficulties for themselves by acting on impulse, without thought or consideration. Polly's wish to be "smiled at," Rowena's wish for Henry to "grow roots," and Adam's wish for water "all over" the farm are all made as the result of situations defined by the characters' strong emotional reactions to circumstances in which, in essence, their desires and intentions are thwarted. In other words, they react to obstacles put in their path with frustration, take impulsive action, and get themselves into very difficult situations as a result. By contrast, getting OUT of those situations initially involves thought, consideration and guidance. Polly realizes what's happened to her with the help of Leland and Lenora and, as the result of that realization, makes conscious and deliberate choices to change what she can. The aftermath of Rowena's wish is defined by the actions of the more thoughtful, rational, and considered Sam Waxman, who doesn't give in to panic and feeling the same way Rowena does and helps her come





perhaps not to a solution to her problem but to greater insight into the truth at the heart of her problem. For Adam, saving himself, his family and their possessions involves quick planning and quick action, but planning nonetheless. Ultimately, there is the sense that if these three characters had thought more carefully BEFORE making their wishes, instead of being forced to think AFTERWARDS, trouble might have been avoided. This is the lesson in the actions and attitude of Stew Meat, who prudently and patiently puts his wish card in a safe place until he has fuller, more dispassionate insight into what it can do and what he would LIKE it to do. In other words, he refuses to act on impulse, and as a result ends up with the capacity to resolve difficulties, rather than impulsively creating them.

## The Value of Forgiveness

Each of the central characters in the three "Tales ..." has an experience of being forgiven not only for making the wish, but for what they did and/or how they behaved BEFORE the wish was made. In Polly's case, forgiveness comes from Leland and Lenora who, while being quite plain and clear about when and how her sharp tongued behavior upsets them, genuinely care for her and forgive her for her hurtfulness. Rowena is forgiven for her foolish devotion to Henry Piper by the loving Sam Waxman, who is also wise enough to see that Rowena needs to learn the truth about both him and Piper on her own. Adam is forgiven by his similarly loving and wise Pa, who clearly understands why Adam did what he did and, in spite of losing that for which he had striven his whole life, manages to get past his sense of loss and reach the compassionate heart of the experience. In short, Polly, Rowena and Adam are all loved, all three are forgiven, and all three are made better human beings not only as the result of what they learn about themselves through their impulsive wishes, but also by what they learn about other people - specifically, about their capacity to love. This raises an interesting question - can Thaddeus Blinn truly be as evil, as much a spawn of Satan, as Stew Meat suggests if his actions eventually have a positive result? Can evil awaken love and compassion?



# Style

## Point of View

Different sections of the book are narrated from different points of view. The "Prologue" and "Epilogue" are narrated in the first person voice of Stew Meat (see "Characters"), while the "Three Tales" themselves are narrated in a third person voice that is ostensibly that of Stew Meat, but which doesn't have the idiomatic, more intimate, more relaxed style of the "Prologue or the "Epilogue." In other words, while both "Prologue" and "Epilogue" contain interjections of Stew Meat's subjective commentary, the "Three Tales" themselves are told more objectively, even while they focus primarily on the experiences of the central characters of each tale. Polly's story focuses on Polly's perspective, Rowena's on Rowena's, Adam's on Adam's.

Meanwhile, it's also important to consider the piece's primary thematic point of view - specifically, its commentary on the dangers of buying into perceived illusion. Specifically, Rowena perceives perfection in Henry Piper, makes a wish to keep that perfection in her life, and discovers the selfishness and insensitivity that that apparent perfection is masking. Polly perceives perfection in Agatha and Eunice, but discovers the shallowness and superficiality and emptiness underneath, which THEIR perfection conceals. Both Polly and Rowena, as well as Adam perceive in Thaddeus Blinn perhaps not perfection but ideal solutions to all their problems. Only Stew Meat is able to sense the lurking menace in Blinn's promises, the possibility that serious trouble lies beneath Blinn's apparent selflessness and generosity. In short, Stew Meat's skepticism is a thematically significant statement that essentially comes down to that age old saying "Buyer Beware," a point of view that is perhaps somewhat ironic, emerging as it does in the narrative voice of a shopkeeper.

## Setting

There are two elements of the book's setting that are important to note, its setting in time and its setting in place. In terms of the former, there is no clear indication of when, exactly, the action is set, but there are hints. Adam Fiske's use of a horse and cart instead of a truck to fetch water is a particularly vivid suggestion that the events of the narrative are taking place in an era in which industrialization and/or mechanization was not prevalent, Henry Piper's selling of farm equipment notwithstanding. In other words, there is a strong feel of early- or pre-industrial revolution, the late 1800's or early 1900's. This suggestion is reinforced by some of the language and terminology used in both narration and dialogue (see also "Language and Meaning" below).

In terms of the book's setting in place, again there is no specific location identified - or, more specifically, there is no indication of where Coven Tree actually is. There are, however, similar strong indications. In particular, a reference in Stew Meat's to "Yankee" common sense clearly suggests a setting of the North Eastern United States, "Yankee"



historically having been used as a term to describe both the attitudes and individuals making their homes and/or lives in that part of the world. This adds a possible layer of meaning to the concept of achieving gain through wishing, since the idea of receiving benefit or gain only from what you earn, or for which you work, is stereotypically regarded as a so-called "Yankee" attitude. In other words, if one gains through the employment of a magical wish, one hasn't really WORKED for that gain, the further implication being that one deserves whatever trouble results from taking advantage of what one HASN'T earned. In short, by using wishes rather than common sense Polly, Rowena and Adam all get what they deserve.

## Language and Meaning

As suggested above in "Setting," there are clear indications of both period and attitude in much of the narration and the dialogue. There is, for lack of a better term, a strong sense of the "old fashioned" about the book, that its story is not quite as removed from contemporary time and place as stories that begin with "once upon a time," but is fairly narratively removed from what might be termed today's reality. Characters express frustration with words and phrases like "Consarn it!" and "Durnedest thing I've ever seen." Description refers to things like "cookstoves" and Stew Meat's general store, both terms for aspects of rural life that have all but disappeared. Action is described in terms like "Mrs. Kemp came a-running" to Polly, phrasing which, again, evokes a time, place and sensibility that, in many ways, is reminiscent of language used in folk tales and fables.

The folksy, so called "down home" style of the book's use of language and evocation of meaning is most clearly apparent in Stew Meat's first person narrations of the "Prologue" and "Epilogue." There is the very strong feel, in both sections, of a grandfather talking to a grandchild who needs to be taught a lesson - not a violent lesson, just a very clear one. The reader is getting a firm talking to from an elder who has experience and thinks the reader had better sit still, be quiet and pay attention, mind his or her p's and q's, as the saying goes, and learn a lesson about life.

## Structure

There are a couple of important points to note about the work's structure. First, and as previously discussed, the book's three main "tales" are bookended by a prologue and an epilogue, in which chatty but firm narrator Stew Meat both introduces and wraps up the narrative describing events in which he took part, but which also begin and conclude the events that take place in the three longer, central narratives.

The second, and perhaps more interesting, point to note about the book's structure is that events in each of the three narratives take place in the same time frame. In other words, the "Prologue" takes place on the Saturday of the social, the "Epilogue" takes place on the Thursday after the social, and the events in the three main "tales" take place on the days between. Polly has her experiences, Rowena has hers, and Adam



has his all at the same time (quite the week in Coven Tree). These parallel lines of action occasionally intersect, most interestingly in Polly's story, the first one in the series, in which references to Rowena standing in the woods and talking to trees awaken the reader's curiosity about how she used HER wish. Other similar intersections, in which, for example, Polly's experiences are referred to in Rowena's and/or Adam's stories, trigger insights and discoveries in the other characters; as a result of hearing what's happening to Polly and realizing it's probably a result of her wish, Rowena starts to wonder if what's happening to her and Henry is the result of HERS. Same for Adam. In short, structure and theme parallel and reinforce each other. By having similar experiences happen to similar characters in similar ways on parallel time and narrative lines, the book suggests that the characters' essential experiences (i.e. being taken in by illusion) can, perhaps, be extended into the idea that longing for illusion to be truth, and the consequences of impulsive acting on that longing, is a fairly fundamental human experience.



## Quotes

"Here in Coven Tree we're no strangers to magic. I'm not talking about the rabbit-from-a-hat or coin-up-the-sleeve variety, either. I mean REAL magic." Prologue, p. 3.

"He put me in mind of Santa Claus, shaved and dressed for warm weather." Ibid, p. 7

"I want ever so badly to be liked ... and not just by Leland and Lenora either. I want people to greet me and not walk on the other side of the street whenever they set eyes on me. And especially I want Agatha Benthorn to invite me to her house for tea ... I'm wishing that people will pay attention to me. And smile when they see me ... .." "Jug-a-Rum", p. 30 - Polly's Wish.

"For the first time she could remember, Polly was deep down scared. Twice yesterday, the only sound she had been able to make was a bullfrog's deep jug-a-rum. Even now she was afraid to open her mouth for fear that the frog sound would come out. What made it happen? It wasn't any disease she'd ever heard of. And she didn't think she was going crazy." Ibid, p. 45.

"The thought of what had happened set Polly's head to spinning dizzily. She couldn't help wondering how things would be from now on. There was no possibility of unwishing what she'd asked for ... she'd be like this forever, forced to say only whipped-cream compliments and sweet things to people, no matter how horrid they were. Either that or begin the ridiculous croaking." Ibid, p. 51

"Polly just stared at those two girls as if she was seeing 'em for the first time. She recalled the months and years when she'd have given anything to get an invitation to Agatha's house. Now here she was, and it wasn't at all the pleasant thing she'd expected. It was - it was boring, that's what it was." Ibid, p. 66

"I wish - I wish Henry Piper would put down roots here in Coven Tree and never leave again!" "The Tree Man," p. 85 - Rowena's Wish.

"Rowena stayed with her unwelcome guest until late that evening ... she kept thinking about how [Henry] might never get loose, She'd have to spend the rest of her life caring for that - that ignoramus who'd become rooted in her back yard. Two days ago she'd wanted more than anything for Henry to remain in Coven Tree. Now she couldn't stand the sight of him." Ibid, p. 105

"Sometimes she'd get so worried about Henry's plight that she'd go all sick inside and want to scream and scream, or else run off somewhere and hide. Then Sam would give her a wink or a nod or a few whispered words, and she'd find the strength to go on." Ibid, p. 112



"It seemed to Rowena that something about Sam had changed. His face wasn't that of a boy anymore, but that of a man. And when he spoke, it was in a man's voice, strong and sure, yet soft and comforting." Ibid, p. 121

"Pa'd saved for a long time to buy this land, and he'd built the house and barn with his own hands. His stubborn pride refused to allow him to become beholden to any man." "Water, Water, Everywhere," p. 126

"When I walk over an underground stream holding the prongs of my dowsing rod, t'other end of it will twist down and point to water like a fish pole when a trout hits the lure." Ibid, p. 131 - Uncle Poot.

"I wish ... I wish we had water all over this farm. Enough for washing and cooking and drinking and for the crops, and - and with plenty to spare, too!" Ibid, p. 135-6, Adam's wish.

"I must have made the same wish a hundred times in years past. The only difference was, I didn't have the card with the red spot, But if I'd had it, I'd have used it, same as you ... I'm sad that our farm is gone. But I'm not angry with you. Wishing that things were better is something all people do." Ibid, p. 167-8, Pa.

"... as hopeless as their plights seemed, I guess for every problem there's a solution of some kind." "Epilogue," p. 172

"I wish ... now I have to get this just right - I wish that all three of these young'uns will have their wishes canceled out this very minute. And Mr. Blinn, I don't want any of the misery that usually comes with such wishing, either." Ibid, p. 176 - Stew Meat's wish.



## Topics for Discussion

As discussed in "Themes," the lives and ways of the central characters in all three "Tales" are changed, for the better, as the result of their encounters with Blinn's magic. And yet, Stew Meat refers almost explicitly to Blinn as a "creature of darkness," of Satan. Can Thaddeus Blinn truly be as evil, as much a spawn of Satan, as Stew Meat suggests if his actions eventually have a positive result? In what other ways has evil ultimately enabled good, not necessarily in the book but in the world at large?

What is the individual moral teaching, or lesson, in each of the three main tales?

Examine the wishes made by each of the characters for the clue to what happens to them as the result of making their wishes. For Polly, see "Quotes - p. 30," for Rowena see "Quotes," p. 85, and for Adam, see "Quotes," p. 135-6.

In each of the three main stories, a secondary character or characters with negative values is contrasted with another secondary character, or characters, with mirrored, positive values. For each story, identify and contrast each set of contrasting characters.

Do you think that Stew Meat was right in using his wish to free Polly, Rowena and Adam from their situations? Or do you think he should have kept his wish to himself, thereby making the three young people accept and live with complete responsibility for their actions? Explain your answer.

Discuss whether the types of wishes made by the two girls (i.e. self-serving, relationship oriented), as opposed to the wish made by the boy (i.e. self-effacing, property-oriented), constitute stereotypical and/or negative portrayals of either gender, or both.

Consider and discuss experiences in which you acted on impulse, as opposed to acting after careful consideration of the consequences. Were the results negative or positive? Do you agree or disagree with the book's thematic perspective on the dangers of acting on impulse?

Consider and discuss experiences in which you discovered the truth beneath an illusion, or beneath lies that had been told to you. What were the consequences of that discovery? How did your attitudes towards those who practiced the illusion, or told you the lies, change? How did your attitude about, and/or understanding of, yourself change?

Consider and discuss experiences in which you've been forgiven for making a mistake. How did your relationship with the person doing the forgiving change? How did you change as the result of being forgiven? Do you forgive easily, or do you hold grudges? What is the overall value of forgiveness in a person's life?