

The Wishing Tree Short Guide

The Wishing Tree by William Faulkner

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

The Wishing 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.....	9
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	10
For Further Reference.....	11
Related Titles.....	12
Copyright Information.....	13

Overview

The Wishing Tree shows a softer side of Faulkner, the realistic and sometimes violent, "southern gothic" writer. It is a gentle, moving account of a young girl's awakening to the realities of adulthood.

It approaches growing up from a child's point of view and is infused throughout with idealism and faith. Despite the tragic undercurrent—the knowledge that the child is seriously ill—the story ends with the hope that next year's birthday wishes will bring new and unexpected adventures.

The adventures of Dulcie and her friends are structured around the search for the "wishing tree" that will grant all childhood wishes. While on their quest, the children learn about themselves and about the responsibility of choosing their wishes carefully. The children meet with a number of exciting adventures, through which they are guided by the magical elf, Maurice. At the end of the story Dulcie and her friends return to the world of everyday reality and to Dulcie's birthday celebration. The journey has turned out to be an initiation into adulthood.

About the Author

William Cuthbert Faulkner was born September 25, 1897, in New Albany, Mississippi. He grew up in the towns of New Albany and Oxford, Mississippi, where his ancestors had been among the first settlers. His greatgrandfather, William Clark Falkner [sic], was a colonel in the Civil War, a successful entrepreneur, author of a best-selling novel, *The White Rose of Memphis* (1880), and a politician. Faulkner's father, Murray Falkner, operated a livery stable and later served as treasurer at the University of Mississippi.

Although a gifted student, Faulkner lost interest and dropped out of high school before graduation. He later attended the University of Mississippi for a semester after completing flight training with the Royal Air Force in Canada.

In 1924-1925 Faulkner lived in New Orleans, where he met writer Sherwood Anderson. Anderson helped him publish his first novel, *Soldiers' Pay* (1926), a book about the plight of a returning veteran. Faulkner had previously published a book of poems entitled *The Marble Faun* (1924). Only with *Sartoris* (1929) did he begin his series of Yoknapatawpha novels, which includes such important works as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), *The Hamlet* (1940), and *Go Down, Moses* (1942).

These books are set in Yoknapatawpha County, a fictional county in northern Mississippi. Faulkner's major novels are difficult fictional works involving complex narrative structure and the use of parallels from classical and biblical literature.

The Wishing Tree is one of the few stories that Faulkner wrote specifically for young readers. In fact, Faulkner wrote it for a single young reader, a dying child named Margaret Brown whom he had entertained with stories during visits to her home. He presented *The Wishing Tree* to her as a birthday gift. Although written in 1927, the story was not published until 1964 after Faulkner's death.

Setting

The setting presents a detailed description of the southern family and landscape in the 1920s. The introduction of the fantasy world allows Faulkner to open the reader to the possibilities of magic and magical characters. Most significantly, Faulkner reveals his ability to communicate the importance of time and change. Through the use of language and symbol the story manages to suggest a simultaneous sense of present and future time.

Social Sensitivity

Believing that children need to confront truth head-on, Faulkner refused to simplify the complications of adult life.

The heroine, Dulcie, faces the future without fear and without resorting to comforting illusions. For instance, the marital problems between Alice and her husband are discussed openly before the children, while the unnamed old man is nagged relentlessly by his spouse. Furthermore, the book contains a realistic discussion of how society tries to solve its disputes through warfare.

The old man and Alice's husband, who has just returned from the First World War, expose the children to the senseless and demeaning aspects of war.

Of special concern is Faulkner's depiction of race. Again, the depiction is realistic, showing race relations in the South as they existed in the 1920s. Dulcie treats her black nurse Alice as a servant, and although Faulkner disagrees with this view, he narrates the story from the point of view of the white children. Part of the human evil which the children must learn to recognize lies in their own racial attitudes. The reader of the story will undoubtedly be sensitive to the treatment of black characters.

Only when it is understood that Faulkner wishes to portray prejudice as one of the corruptions of adult society can the story be read sympathetically.

Literary Qualities

The Wishing Tree demonstrates many of the elements of narrative skill that a reader finds in Faulkner's adult novels.

It contains a broad range of characters from a wide social spectrum. Structured around the adventures of these central characters, *The Wishing Tree* is an entertaining fantasy in which adult understandings are translated into the language of the child. Although the plot of the story seems relatively static, the dramatic crisis occurs when Dulcie is separated from her companions and returns to her real-life birthday. At this point the story becomes entirely realistic, for the knowledge of human frailty and death gained from the journey must be put to use in real life.



Themes and Characters

The Wishing Tree is a work of fantasy which seems to owe much to Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Whimsically, Dulcie's adventures result from her getting into bed left foot first and turning the pillow over before going to sleep.

(These are old Southern superstitions.)

The character of Dulcie is well rendered: she is a bold, fearless girl who is eager to experience adventure and to learn about the world of adults. The other characters in Dulcie's fantasy world mostly resemble the familiar members of her real-life household of family and servants. But the children's search for the wishing tree and their subsequent adventures are guided by an elflike being named Maurice.

Maurice delights the children with his magical powers, as when he inflates rubber ponies that unexpectedly become living animals. When they find the wishing tree, Maurice introduces them to its magic, as well, and the children soon learn that they must live with the consequences of their wishes. George is granted his wish of so much cake and strawberries that he is sick for a week.

After each of the children learns a valuable lesson, St. Francis appears briefly to supply the moral of the tale, advising them to wish unselfishly because learning unselfishness is a part of growing up. He asks the children to protect the helpless and care for the weak, after which Dulcie is separated from her friends and returned to the real world.

An undercurrent of sadness and impending tragedy suffuses the lighter and more playful elements of the story. After passing through her adventures and returning to the real world, Dulcie encounters a gray riyer standing up on its edge, symbolizing the gray mist of death through which she must pass. The Wishing Tree reveals remarkable ability to deal directly with the issue of death and to present dying in terms which are understandable to children. While the story deals on one level with the traditional "birthday wish," Faulkner intended to convey the emotions of the dying child's parents as well as those of the child herself. As such the story attempts to bridge the gap between adult and childhood understandings of death.



Topics for Discussion

1. How is the plot of the story based on the elements of a child's birthday party, such as waking up on the special day, having guests for a party, making of a birthday wish, and receiving presents?

What makes this particular birthday special for Dulcie?

2. How is this story about disappointment as well as fulfillment? Why did Faulkner not tell a more optimistic birthday story? Or is the ending more optimistic than it first appears?

3. What gifts does Dulcie receive for her birthday? Does she also receive a new understanding of life as an adult?

4. What kinds of adults do we meet in the story? Do they seem happy and satisfied with life? What sorts of problems do these adults have?

5. Discuss the fundamental symbols in the story—the wishing tree and the gray river at the end. What do the tree and the river symbolize?

6. Discuss Alice's fear of wishes, and compare her attitude to that of Dulcie.

Why is Alice more careful and fearful of the future?

7. What suggestions do we have in the story that it is about a dying child? What does Faulkner teach about the way we must face death?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Faulkner once said that there are only a handful of universal stories that each writer retells. What other stories of initiation resemble *The Wishing Tree*, and how is Faulkner's retelling unique?
2. As a children's writer, how does Faulkner resemble Lewis Carroll and A. A. Milne, two writers whom he admired?
3. From the list of related titles below, attempt to find elements in Faulkner's treatment of childhood that run throughout his work.
4. Several of Faulkner's most important works, such as *The Sound and the Fury* and *Light in August*, focus on the initiation to adulthood of adolescent girls. Describe Dulcie as a heroine, and show how Faulkner imbues her character with significance, perhaps through the use of mythic parallels.
5. Describe the social relationships of the children and the adults in the story.

What kinds of social disputes exist? How are the social lives of the children and the adults organized? How does Faulkner suggest improvements to society?

For Further Reference

Blotner, Joseph. *Faulkner: A Biography*.

New York: Random House, 1974. The most complete biography of Faulkner, containing an account of the composition of *The Wishing Tree*.

Ditsky, John. "William Faulkner's *The Wishing Tree*: Maturity's First Draft."

The Lion and The Unicorn (Spring 1978): 56-64. One of the fullest treatments of the subject, focusing on the work as children's literature.

Gidley, Mark. "Faulkner and Children."

Signal (September 1970): 91-102. A study focused on *The Wishing Tree* by a prominent Faulkner scholar.

Karl, Frederick R. *William Faulkner: American Writer*. New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989. This biography explores the autobiographical elements in Faulkner's novels and stories; includes a bibliography, chronology, and index.

Wells, Dean Faulkner. *The Ghosts of Rowan: William Faulkner's Ghost Oak Stories for Children*. Oxford: Yoknapatawpha Press, 1980. Ghost stories that Faulkner told to children, recounted by his niece.

Related Titles

A number of Faulkner's stories and novels center on the experiences of children and adolescents, including the Civil War and Reconstruction stories of *The Unvanquished*, the childhood sequences of *The Sound and the Fury*, the young Chick Mallison's struggle for racial justice in *Intruder in the Dust*, and the child's-eye view of adults in *The Reivers*. Although none of these works were written specifically for young readers, all can be read by high-school students.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, the heroine Caddie Compson resembles Dulcie in a number of ways. Dulcie's quest for knowledge corresponds to Caddie's precocious awareness of such "taboo" subjects as death and sexuality. Both heroines face a tragic future with admirable courage. Also, Dulcie's brothers, George and Dicky, resemble Caddie's brothers, Quentin and Jason.

The black nurse Alice resembles the character of Dilsey. Minor details, such as the association of St. Francis with the heroine's stories, also connect the two works.

A connection also exists between *The Wishing Tree* and the ghost stories that Faulkner later told each Halloween to entertain his daughter and her friends.

These ghost stories have been recounted by Faulkner's niece, Dean Faulkner Wells, in *The Ghosts of Rowan Oak: William Faulkner's Ghost Stories for Children*.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

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

Includes bibliographical references and index

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

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

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

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

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

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

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

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