

# **The Witch of Blackbird Pond**

## **An Integrated Literature and History Unit**

**by**  
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**Grade Levels:** 5-8

**Content Areas:** Reading/Literature, Writing, US History, Character education

**Description:** This unit, based on the novel *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* by Elizabeth George Speare, explores the concepts of forgiveness and loving one's enemies within the context of colonial American history. Students will explore these concepts while learning about the English colonies in the Western Hemisphere, the Puritans, and some of the political and religious issues prevalent in the late seventeenth century.

**Process:**

This unit is designed to be taught over approximately 4 weeks.

Although this is primarily a literature unit, extension activities can be used to tie it to US History and Bible classes as well.

**Materials Needed:**

Copy of *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* by Elizabeth G Speare for each student  
3 X 5 index cards (100 for each student)  
One large key ring for each student  
Outline map of the Western Hemisphere

**Note:** The phrase "Damn them" appears in chapter 17. Discussion questions are included in the activities to help the teacher use this opportunity to discuss this issue using a fictional character rather than students' own behavior. Students are often more likely to discuss openly this way.

## Pre-Reading Activities

**Map study:** Have students locate the various European colonies in America. On a blank map of the Western Hemisphere, have them outline, label, and color code English, French, Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese colonies.

**Background:** Discuss with the class the political and religious situation in England in the seventeenth century, particularly the antagonism between the Church of England and the Puritans. Students in the United States may already be familiar with some of this from stories of the Pilgrims they've heard at Thanksgiving. If your history textbook has a section about the Pilgrims or the Puritans (or both), this would be a good time to use that as well.

As part of this discussion, look at the colony map you've made. Have students find the English colonies and research which colonies were started for religious purposes, which churches or groups began each of those colonies, and for what reason.

**Universal Themes:** Each of the following concepts provides a major theme for *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*. Discuss each concept as a class, having students divide into partners or small groups to discuss one concept at a time. Then have one person from each group report to the class as the basis for a classwide discussion.

Alternate activity: Have students write a paragraph or journal entry on each of these topics. Ask them to imagine they are in a situation where they have to deal with this issue. How would they feel? What would they do?

**Concepts:**

Tolerance for people who are different

Dealing with injustice

Moving to a new place where you don't know anyone

# Reading Activities

## Chapter 1

**Synopsis:** Kit Tyler is on a ship, the *Dolphin*, bound for Wethersfield, Connecticut. She has grown up on Barbados, where her grandfather, a wealthy plantation owner, raised her. Her grandfather recently died and she is going to live with her aunt and uncle, whom she has never met. When the ship makes a short stop at Saybrook, Kit goes ashore. Kit becomes the subject of much hostility and suspicion when she jumps into the river to retrieve a dropped toy. Another passenger later informs her that in Puritan culture, only witches can swim.

**Background:** Locate Barbados and Connecticut on a map. Partners each choose one colony to research. Have them find information about the climate, culture, government, and reason for establishment of that colony. When research is complete, have partners compare notes and fill out a venn diagram together.

**Background:** Tell students about the English Civil War. Make sure they understand references to it, such as the one on p. 16 “Those Roundheads who murdered King Charles” . . . Make a time line showing the following events: Pilgrims leave for Holland, Pilgrims leave for America, Puritans establish Massachusetts Bay Colony, Beginning of English Civil War, Return of Charles II.

**Descriptions:** This chapter contains several vivid descriptive passages. Choose one to analyze. Locate and identify adjectives in the passage. Discuss the details the author includes in this passage. Then have students write a description of their own. (Trait emphasis: word choice)

**Vocabulary:** Have students create a key-ring dictionary to record vocabulary words during this unit. Have students make one card for each vocabulary word. Have them write the word in large letters at the top of the card. Under this, have them write the definition of the word as it was used in this chapter. Then have them illustrate the word or use it in a sentence. Punch the card in the upper left corner and put it on the key ring. Have students alphabetize their words as they add them to the ring.

Words for chapter 1: wharf, stowing, scrawny, dour-looking, aloof, curdle

## Chapter 2

**Synopsis:** As the ship continues up the river toward Wethersfield, the passengers continue to treat Kit with suspicion, except for John Holbrook, a young man planning to study with the pastor in Wethersfield. Eventually, the captain's son, Nat, also relaxes and begins to treat Kit as a friend. When they finally arrive at Wethersfield, Kit admits that she has not written to her aunt and uncle to notify them of her grandfather's death or of her plan to come live with them. They have no idea she is coming.

**Language:** Discuss changes in word meaning and usage since the 17<sup>th</sup> century: (i.e. "gay", Goodwife) You might read a familiar Bible passage in the KJV and in a modern translation. Talk about changes in wording.

**Social Issues:** The *Dolphin* never carried slaves. Kit had never thought about where they came from. She took slavery for granted. Can you think of any such issues today – things that need to be changed, but that we take for granted?

**Puritan point of view:** John Holbrook tells Kit, ". . . the proper use of reading is to improve our sinful nature, and to fill our minds with God's holy word." Ask students if they agree or disagree? Discuss as a class; then have students write a short essay or journal entry on the following topic: What are our purposes in reading? What constitutes good or appropriate reading.

**Grammar:** Introduce students to the following sentence types – simple, compound, complex. Find examples of each type on the first page of this chapter. Then have students write examples of their own.

**Vocabulary:** Continue adding to dictionary.

Words for chapter 2: tantalize, daub, cowed, furtively, wraith, punctilious, shrewd, intangible, imperceptibly, incredulous

## Chapter 3

**Synopsis:** Kit is disappointed to find that Wethersfield is a small settlement, not the grand town she had expected. She does find a warm welcome from her Aunt Rachel, though, when she arrives at her house. Kit also meets her cousins, the beautiful Judith and Mercy, who is crippled. Her Uncle Matthew is a serious man who is not particularly happy to learn that Kit has come to live with them. He allows her to stay, though, since she is family and has nowhere else to go.

**Characters:** Discuss what you've learned about each character so far. Fill out character web or chart for Kit.

Vocabulary: Continue adding to dictionary.

Chapter 3 words: haughty, nondescript, pewter

## Chapter 4

Synopsis: When Uncle Matthew leaves to work in the fields, Judith, Mercy, and Kit have a great time opening Kit's trunks and trying on all her clothes. Kit offers outfits to each cousin and to her aunt as gifts. Just then, Uncle Matthew comes in and angrily makes them return everything to the trunks, except for one shawl, which he allows Mercy to keep. Everyone returns to work, and Kit discovers that the family has no servants. She will now be expected to work along with everyone else – something she has never done before.

Characters: Fill out a character web or chart for either Judith or Mercy.

Modesty: What do Matthew's reactions to Kit's clothes tell you about what the Puritans considered appropriate dress? What about the girls' reactions? Students might want to do some internet research on clothing and styles during the colonial era.

For discussion: What do we consider appropriate or modest dress? Do an index search to find out what the Bible and Ellen White have to say about the subject. As a class, write a dress code policy that incorporates the ideas you glean from your research and discussion.

Carding wool – This chapter talks about Mercy carding and spinning wool. Find a video or see if you have a local resource person who can demonstrate carding, spinning, and weaving for your class.

Vocabulary: Continue adding to dictionary.

Chapter 4 words: chagrined, tremulous, frippery, unseemly, gaudy, deft, monotonous

## Chapters 5 & 6

Synopsis: On her first Sunday in Wethersfield, Kit is introduced to the Puritan style of worship. After the morning service, Kit renews her acquaintance with John Holbrook. She also meets some other townsfolk, specifically Mistress Ashby and her son, William. Later in the week, when the Reverend Bulkley and John Holbrook come for dinner, Gershom Bulkley and Uncle Matthew get into a heated argument over politics. Mercy changes the subject and settles things down. Later in the evening, Kit learns that William Ashby has asked permission to call on her.

Sabbath observance: Fill out a venn diagram comparing Puritan Sabbath observance as described in the book with the way we observe Sabbath. (Be sure to note day of week, too. This could be a good time to discuss with your students why we keep the seventh-day Sabbath.)

Politics: Help your students understand the argument between Gershom Bulkley and Uncle Matthew by reminding them of the English Civil War and telling more about the Royalists (those who supported King Charles first, now King James) and those who supported Cromwell and the Puritans.

You might also add information about the attempt to rescind Connecticut's charter and establish Andros as governor of a combined Massachusetts/Connecticut colony (see a CT history website)

Characterization: "Show, don't tell" Find examples of different methods of characterization: Description (p. 50), conversation (p. 56&57), interaction with other characters (p. 55-57), actions (p. 58). Ask students to tell what each of these examples shows about the character. Have them look for other examples of each method.

Vocabulary: Continue adding to dictionary  
Chapters 5 & 6 words: pauper, staidness, cadence, timorous,

## **Chapters 7 & 8**

Synopsis: Kit is very uncomfortable when William comes to call on her. Eventually, they join the rest of the family and talk turns again to politics. William and Uncle Matthew disagree and another argument ensues, but William continues to court Kit.

The next day, Kit goes with Judith to weed the onion field and sees a solitary cabin nearby. She learns it belongs to Hannah Tupper, a widow considered a witch by the townspeople. When the girls return home, Kit learns that the selectmen have hired her to help Mercy teach the dame school.

Social History: Have students fill out a comparison/contrast chart showing the similarities and differences between colonial dating customs and ours. Discuss their findings as a class.

Characterization: Use methods discussed in last session to write a character sketch of someone you know well.

Vocabulary: Continue adding to dictionary.

Chapter 7 & 8 words: hasty, sufficient, persisted, implacable, dubiously, rankled

## Chapter 9

Synopsis: Kit enjoys teaching and finding ways to make learning fun until she has the children act out a Bible story. The children begin fighting just as the schoolmaster walks in. Kit is fired. In her misery, she runs to the Great Meadow, where Hannah Tupper finds her and invites her home. Kit finds an understanding friend in Hannah.

Schools: Have students fill out a venn diagram comparing colonial schools with ours. Extension: As a class, develop a thesis and have students write a compare/contrast essay. (Writing trait focus: organization)

Craft: Make a hornbook and/or quill pen. Try making ink out of berries and use it to write with the quill pen.

Characters: Describe Hannah Tupper

Vocabulary: Continue adding to dictionary.

Chapter 9 words: precarious, composure, indulgence, entranced, obstreperous, priggish, ravenous, incoherent, gnarled

## Chapter 10

Synopsis: Kit goes to the schoolmaster and apologizes. The schoolmaster agrees to give her another chance. She continues to visit Hannah whenever she can, even though her family is scandalized. One day when she is visiting Hannah, Nat, the ship captain's son, comes.

History: Using your History textbook and internet or other resources, learn more about how the Puritans related to people of other faiths, such as Quakers and Catholics. Learn also about individuals who disagreed with the Puritans, such as Roger Williams. Ask students for their opinions about why the Puritans acted this way and what they might have done differently.

Universal Themes: Mid-book look – Discuss how each of the three themes has come into the story so far. (See pre-reading activities for a list of universal themes.)

Vocabulary: Add to dictionary

Chapter 10 words: malicious, defiance, revered, toady, unorthodox, reproof, contradictory

## Chapter 11

**Synopsis:** Kit renews her acquaintance with Prudence, the little girl whose doll she had rescued from the river on her way to Wethersfield. Prudence's mother won't allow her to go to school, but Kit offers to teach her secretly. She also introduces Prudence to Hannah. That evening, when William Ashby and John Holbrook are visiting, Kit realizes that Mercy is in love with John.

**Writers' Craft:** Look at how the author handles transitions (i.e. – p. 106 “a week later . . .”) Look for other examples in the story.

**Characters:** Discuss the following: Do you think Kit has done right introducing Prudence to Hannah? Why or why not? Discuss the pros and cons and come to a conclusion as a class.

**Literature:** Find out more about Anne Bradstreet. You should be able to find some biographical information and other examples of her poetry in American Literature anthologies and on the internet.

**Vocabulary:** Add to dictionary

Chapter 11 words: pious, filigree, exquisite, blanched, resolutely, topaz, impulse, qualms, adroit

## Chapter 12

**Synopsis:** Kit goes back to visit Hannah and finds Nat there. She helps him repair Hannah's roof and spends most of the afternoon talking with him. It is late by the time Nat walks her home. When they arrive, William is there. Uncle Matthew is furious when he learns where she has been, and demands that she not return.

**Effective Habits:** Discuss: What are Kit's priorities? How do you know? In what ways does she use integrity? Self-control?

**Characterization:** Discuss: Why does Nat tell Kit the story of the bird? What does that tell you about Nat? About Kit?

**Literature:** Nat and Kit talk about *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare. Introduce your students to the story. Discuss the Puritan attitudes toward drama, as implied in this story. Extension: Research what Ellen White has to say about drama. Compare and contrast her views with those of the Puritans.

**Craft:** Try dipping candles. Kits and supplies are available at craft stores.

Vocabulary: Add to dictionary

Chapter 12 words: bartered, tallow, thatch, bestowing, tangible, nonchalant,

### Chapter 13

Synopsis: William is taking Kit to a husking bee. John wants to spend the evening with Mercy, but Judith misunderstands and claims him as her date. On the way home, William asks Kit to marry him.

Colonial Life: A Husking Bee was a way of making what might otherwise be a boring job fun. Think of a job you don't particularly like and invent a way to make it fun.

Characters: Who does John Holbrook really like? How did he end up with Judith? What does this situation tell you about John? What does it tell you about Judith? How do you think the situation will be resolved?

Vocabulary: Add to dictionary

Chapter 13 words: blithely, wryly, propitious, drudgery, infatuated, foreboding, contrite, incredulous

### Chapter 14

Synopsis: The *Dolphin* comes to town and Nat gives Kit some fabric to deliver to Hannah. He also makes a snide remark about William building a house for his bride. When Kit and Judith arrive home, they learn that the king has appointed a new governor who will come through town on his way to Hartford in three days.

Writer's Craft: Description – Review your study of description in chapter 1, particularly the use of adjectives and details. Also note the author's use of similes and metaphors in this chapter, as well as her use of vivid verbs. Have students write a description using some of these techniques.

Vocabulary: Add to dictionary

Chapter 14 words: mellow, buoyant

### Chapter 15

Synopsis: The men of Wethersfield, including Uncle Matthew, are angry about the new governor, but they realize there isn't much they can do. Kit and Judith go with most of the townspeople to watch as the new governor rides through on his way to Hartford. Later, a messenger reports that the charter

disappeared before it could be surrendered to the new governor.

**Politics:** Explain why Uncle Matthew and his friends were so upset about Governor Andros. What were some of their specific gripes? Compare and contrast their situation with the situation in Palestine during the time of Christ.

**Historical Background:** Look up more information about the Charter Oak (CT history website). If you have a Connecticut state quarter, issued in 2000, have students note that the illustration on the back (a large tree) is the Charter Oak.

**Vocabulary:** Add to dictionary

Chapter 15 words: condescending, venture, brusquely, cavalier, annexed, raucous

## **Chapter 16**

**Synopsis:** On All-Hallows Eve (Halloween), three rivermen lit jack-o-lanterns in William's new house. This was considered blasphemy, which was a crime. The three, one of whom is Nat, are sentenced to time in the stocks and banned from Wethersfield. Kit is upset and goes to Hannah. Prudence comes later and Kit continues her lessons, teaching her to write her name. When Kit returns home, she learns that John is leaving to join the militia as a doctor.

**Historical Background:** Learn about the origin of All Hallows Eve / Halloween history and traditions. Note that Uncle Matthew refers to it as a "papist holiday." What did he mean? Was that an accurate label?

**Characters:** What reasons does Kit give for marrying William? Do you think they are good reasons? Why or why not? What does Hannah mean when she says, "Thee has never escaped at all if love is not there"?

**Writer's Craft:** p. 158 – example of foreshadowing. Discuss what foreshadowing is. Have students look for other examples in this book or in their own writing.

**Characters:** What does final exchange between Judith and the rest of the family tell you about Judith? Who shows empathy? How?

**Vocabulary:** Add to dictionary

Chapter 16 words: roistering, impelled, pillory, tryst, premonition, poignant

## Chapter 17

**Synopsis:** A sickness spreads through the town. Judith is the first in the family to catch it, but Kit and Mercy fall ill soon after. Kit quickly recovers, but Mercy is seriously ill. One evening a group of men come by on their way to Blackbird Pond. They blame Hannah for the epidemic, saying she has bewitched the town. Kit runs to Hannah's house, getting Hannah outside and hidden before the men arrive. They burn Hannah's house, but can't find her. Kit takes Hannah to the riverbank, and sees the *Dolphin* moving upriver. She swims out for help, and Nat and some of the other crew row to land to rescue Hannah. Nat also offers Kit refuge, but she chooses to return home to help care for Mercy.

**Effective Habits:** The people of Wethersfield seem to be playing the "blame game" – looking for someone to blame when something bad happens. Is this something that still happens today? How can situations like this be avoided?

**Language:** p. 173 – "Damn them" – Don't just ignore inappropriate language. Discuss it with students. Ask: Why don't we use that term? What's wrong with it? Why do you think the author chose to use it here? Can you think of any other way the author might have conveyed the same emotion without resorting to inappropriate language?

**Vocabulary:** Continue adding to dictionaries  
Chapter 17 words: vigil, poultice, consternation, receded, serene, docile

## Chapter 18

**Synopsis:** Mercy is recovering and life seems to be returning to normal. Then the town constable arrives at Uncle Matthew's house with the Crufts, Prudence's parents. Kit is being charged with witchcraft. They had found Kit's hornbook in the ruins of Hannah's cottage, and Mrs. Cruff has been suspicious of Kit ever since Kit swam in the river to rescue Prudence's doll. Kit is arrested and taken to the shed behind the constable's house to be held until she can be brought to trial for witchcraft.

**Historical Background:** Read about the Salem Witchcraft trials in your history textbook or another source. Discuss with students how such a thing could happen. (Girls lied to get out of trouble, then had to add to those lies to stay out of worse trouble. People became frightened and hysterical. Others apparently used the situation to get revenge or something else they wanted.)

Character Development: Discuss: Has Kit changed? Has Matthew? In what ways? Why do you think they have changed?

Vocabulary: Continue adding to dictionaries:

Chapter 18 words: laxness, conviction, vengeance, flouting, inveigled

## Chapter 19

Synopsis: Kit is taken to the Town House for an inquiry to decide if she should be tried for witchcraft. Charges are brought against her. Uncle Matthew speaks up in her defense. Then the copybook she had used to teach Prudence to write her name is brought as evidence. Kit does not want to get Prudence in trouble, but just then Nat and Prudence walk in. Prudence shows that she can read and write, and confirms that she is the one who wrote her name in the book. Charges against Kit are dropped. Kit is given the option of bringing countercharges against Goodwife Cruff, but declines.

Characters: Discuss: Why do you think Kit declined to press countercharges against Goodwife Cruff? Do you think she made the right decision? Why or why not? (Bible tie-in: Matthew 5:38-48.)

Vocabulary: Add to dictionary:

Chapter 19 words: magistrate, cronies, vehemently, pandemonium, interceded

## Chapters 20 & 21

Synopsis: Kit and William break up. John returns from the Indian wars and runs, not to Judith, but straight to Mercy. Soon plans for a double wedding are announced: Mercy and John, and Judith and William. Kit is considering returning to Barbados when Nat returns with his own ship, the *Witch*, and asks Kit to marry him.

Universal Themes: Go back to the list of themes in the pre-reading activities. As a class, discuss each theme as it relates to *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*. Also discuss how each concept can be applied to our lives today. As a final project, you might have students write an essay, poem, or song, or create a poster about one of these themes.

Final Writing Project: Have students write a short story based on one of the writing prompts on the Final Writing Projects sheet. (See next page.)

Vocabulary: Check student dictionaries to be sure they are complete and

accurate. You might ask them to use a number of these words in their final writing projects or other class assignments. You might also have students design crossword puzzles or other word puzzles and games using these words.

## The Witch of Blackbird Pond Final Writing Project

Choose **one** of the following projects to complete. Be sure to use what you have learned about description and character development as you write your story.

(Questions in parentheses are to give you ideas. Your story does **not** have to answer all of them.)

1. Rewrite the story of Kit's trial from the point of view of another character.
  - How did it look to Prudence?
  - What parts did she experience?
  - Which things did she miss?
  - How did she feel?
  - What was she thinking about? What about Nat? Uncle Matthew? Goodwife Cruff?
2. Write a sequel to the book.
  - Do Kit and Nat ever return to Wethersfield?
  - Does Goodwife Cruff change?
  - Do Kit and Nat see Hannah often?