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Across Five Aprils

by

Irene Hunt

1964



MonkeyNotes by D. L. Cassie

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The story takes place on the Creighton farm in Jasper County, a rural area in southern Illinois. It is not far from Sangamon County, where Abraham Lincoln lived. The nearest town is Newton and some scenes are set there, as it is the heart of the community where the Creighton family shops and gets their

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Jethro Creighton – Jethro, the protagonist, is nine years old at the beginning of the story and the youngest of the Creighton family. He is forced into the responsibilities of the man of the house when his brothers go off to war and his father becomes ill. He deals with the social and emotional effects of war while maturing into a strong, understanding man.

Jenny Creighton – Jenny is fourteen years old, the only Creighton daughter still at home. She and Jethro comfort each other as they struggle together to keep up the farm and weather the emotional uncertainties of the war. She is in love with Shadrach Yale, the schoolmaster, but is forbidden to marry him because of her youth.

Shadrach Yale – Shad came to Jasper County to teach at the local school. He is both Jethro's teacher and friend, encouraging Jethro's book learning as well as his understanding of the war. Shadrach is twenty years old and is treated like family by the Creightons. He loves Jethro and is in love with Jenny, but leaves them both as he goes off to war. He gets badly injured, but recovers and marries Jenny.

Ross Milton – Ross is the editor of the local Newton newspaper. He meets and befriends Jethro when Jethro travels alone to Newton for the first time. He defends Jethro in town and mentors his education in proper grammar and speaking. Over time he becomes a comforting friend to the Creightons and even accompanies Jenny when she travels to Washington to see the injured Shadrach Yale.

Minor Characters

Ellen Creighton – Ellen, Jethro's mother, once pretty, is now the somber mother of twelve children. Her oldest child went off to California to find gold, two daughters have married and moved to Ohio, three sons died from disease as children, and one daughter was killed when the drunken Travis Burdow overturned her.....

Many additional minor characters are outlined in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Protagonist – The protagonist is Jethro Creighton, a boy struggling with the responsibilities of manhood and the uncertainties of war. He is forced to try to understand loss on many levels. He loses a sister in a tragic wagon accident, loses his teacher and friend, Shadrach, to the Union war effort, loses his.....

Antagonist – There is no particular character that plays the role of the antagonist. Rather, the time in history, the American Civil War, provides the conflict. Jethro must contend with the way it

Climax – As the war escalates, battles are won and lost, the perception of who is the victor constantly wavering. The story climaxes as the war climaxes. The battles of Gettysburg and Vicksburg begin the.....

Outcome – Lincoln is reelected and the war ends. Amnesty is granted to Southerners, as brothers, sons and fathers return home. But peace is not a "perfect pearl." Lincoln is assassinated and Jethro, "schooled as....."

SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

In April 1861, Ellen Creighton and her son Jethro are working the family farm in southern Illinois. Ellen is weighed down with worry. The entire county feels the tension of impending war. People are wondering if Lincoln will ever declare war. Then, Shadrach Yale, the local schoolteacher and Jethro's friend, comes with news that the Confederates have fired on Fort Sumter. Young Jethro is excited about the pageantry of war, but soon learns the harsh reality as his brothers, his cousin, and his teacher go off to fight. Bill, Jethro's favorite brother, decides to fight for the South.

Jethro is asked to go to Newton, fifteen miles away, to make some sales and purchases. He is proud that his parents are trusting him to take on this manly responsibility. At the town store he meets men that disapprove of Jethro's support for his brother Bill, who they perceive as a traitor. One man is particularly threatening, hinting that Jethro could come to harm. Jethro also meets Ross Milton, editor of the.....

THEMES

The most powerful theme of *Across Five Aprils* is the bond of family. The loving relationships between the Creightons are a constant presence. Hunt also chooses a theme that shows how perceptions of the war can vary. There is a difference between the politics of war and the realities of war; between the.....

MOOD

There is a feeling of gravity and melancholy that naturally accompanies the unpredictability of war. The story of Jethro Creighton, however adds the feeling of determination. Working the land, being subject to Nature's whims and twists of fate, makes Jethro accepting of his lot and not expectant of.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Irene Hunt was born May 8, 1907 in the town of Pontiac, Illinois. Her family moved to Newton, Illinois while she was still a baby. There she grew up on the family farm, which became the setting of Hunt's first novel *Across Five Aprils*. (This book was not published until Hunt was fifty-seven years old.) Her father died when she was seven. This traumatic experience provided the basis for the opening scene of Hunt's second novel, *Up A Road Slowly*, where a young girl must come to terms with the death of her mother.

Hunt graduated from the University of Illinois in 1939, and earned her Masters degree from the University of Minnesota in 1946. She also pursued advanced graduate work in psychology at the University of Colorado in Boulder. During the 1930's and early 1940's Hunt taught French and English in Oak Park, Illinois. Then she went to South Dakota where she taught psychology. In the 1950's she went back to

LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Across Five Aprils begins at a time in history when the nation was "grave and absorbed in the anxious thoughts of that spring". The events behind these feelings were the seeds of the American Civil War. Abraham Lincoln had hoped to cool the nation's passion with his inaugural address, but on his first day in office he received the news that Major Anderson was running out of supplies at Fort Sumter. Within weeks, Northern newspapers carried stories that Anderson's men would be pulled out, though Lincoln, in reality, had given no such order. Public opinion supported the reinforcement of Fort Sumter at all costs. Lincoln, however, chose to resupply provisions only, not men, arms or ammunition, unless the fort was attacked. The character Cousin.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS

CHAPTER 1

Summary

It is April, 1861. Nine-year-old Jethro Creighton and his mother, Ellen, are working together on the family farm. Jethro is described as “favored” by Ellen as he is the youngest of her twelve children and was born the same year that three of her other children died from disease. He is a bright and eager boy, a good worker and a quick learner. He has a close relationship with Shadrach Yale, the local schoolteacher, who appreciates Jethro’s delight in learning, and is also interested in marrying Jethro’s older sister, Jenny.

There is an anxious feeling among the adults on the farm due to the prospect of war. Jethro sides with his older brother Tom and cousin Eb who are excited and confident that the North will make quick work of the war and that all will be back home safely when it is over. The other adults are worried, concerned with the reality of war and the death of their children.

Jethro is reminded of his sister Mary’s death eighteen months ago. She and her date were heading home from a dance and they were followed by a drunken youth named Travis Burdow. Travis fired a pistol causing the horses that drew Mary’s wagon to bolt and overturn the wagon. Mary was killed. Being that the entire Burdow family had been fiercely despised throughout the community for generations, this incident aroused a lynch mob. Matthew Creighton, Jethro’s father, pleaded with the crowd to avoid further bloodshed and, as testament to the respect Matt commanded in the community, Travis Burdow was spared. Matt’s actions after Mary’s death are likened in Jethro’s mind to Abraham Lincoln’s hesitancy to declare war. Ellen explains to Jethro that Lincoln has to pick between two fearsome choices.

Jethro and his mother work the field until mid-day at which time the family gathers in their cabin for dinner and an hour of rest. John, Jethro’s oldest brother left at home joins them along with his quiet wife, Nancy, and their children. Jethro is allowed to sit at the “first table” with his parents, older brothers, John, Tom, and Jethro’s favorite, Bill, and his cousin Eb Carron who has lived with the Creightons since he was orphaned in childhood. Jenny and Nancy serve dinner and then pour coffee. Jethro accepts the family tradition that coffee is an “adult luxury”, however Bill dips some bread into his own coffee and offers it to Jethro. The family finishes their meal in silence, trying to avoid talk of the probability of war. Jethro is aware of the tension, but is focused on the goodness of the food.

After a short rest Jethro and his mother return to the fields. They work until after sundown. During a ten-minute break, a wagon approaches along the road. It is Wilse Graham, the son of Ellen’s sister from Kentucky. Ellen is pleased with anticipation of news from her relatives. Jethro is happy that the monotonous routine of the day is interrupted by “comp’ny”.

Notes

The tone of determination along with a feeling of melancholy is created in this opening chapter. The main character, Jethro Creighton, is introduced as a boy who appreciates the springtime and does not concern himself with the “adult world of trouble.” He works hard, driven by dedication to his family. This bond is illustrated by the warm interaction between Jethro and his mother in the fields, Jenny’s attention to Jethro at dinner, and Bill’s offering of bread dipped in coffee. Ellen Creighton is proud that her family has this feeling of closeness. The feeling of family even extends to Shadrach Yale, whom Jethro looks up to as a role model. The impending war will challenge the Creighton family ties.

Coffee is presented as a symbol of growing into adulthood. Jethro likes coffee, but accepts that he is not given any because he is just a boy. Bill recognizes that Jethro is now a field worker that has been promoted to the

“first table” and gives Jethro a taste of coffee with bread. This taste matches laboring in the fields and sitting with the adults as Jethro’s first “taste” of manhood.

CHAPTER 2

Summary

As it grows dark, the men return from the fields. Jenny and Nancy prepare a deliciously described farm fresh “compn’y supper”. The pleasurable conversation of family, weddings, births, deaths, and occasional good fortune gradually gives way to the troubles of the nation. Matthew asks Wilse about the possibility of Kentucky seceding. Wilse confirms that possibility and argues for the South. Matt, Ellen and John argue against slavery. Then Bill, quiet and pensive at first, asks accusing questions of both sides and reminds John, “We’re from the South.” Ellen calls the troubled, uncomfortable exchange to a halt and the conversation is awkwardly directed away from “hard talk”.

The dinnertime exchange causes feelings of turmoil and frustration for Jethro. He had been excited and confident about the shining horses and easy victory the war would bring, but now he begins to realize war is something beyond that. He fights the urge to cry as Jenny pours him some more milk.

After dinner Bill helps Jenny in the kitchen and the rest of the family waits outside for Shadrach Yale to arrive with news from town. Shad arrives wearily with news that, “The Confederates have fired on Fort Sumter.” The details of the battle, as reported in the papers, are discussed. Wilse angrily accuses “Ol’ Abe” of fixing the situation to incriminate the South. Eb vows to get involved in the war and he and Tom leave the group. Jethro falls asleep, tired and worried as the men continue talking. “It’s war.”

Notes

This chapter again illustrates the bond of family. All are pleased and excited to see Cousin Wilse and hear news of those they hadn’t seen for years. When the conversation turns into an angry debate about the war, Ellen stops the argument and reminds Wilse that he is welcome and loved. However Wilse’s comments and Bill’s reticence and reluctance to choose a side foreshadow how the family will be strained as the war progresses.

The family argument, which explains the historic argument between North and South, deeply affects Jethro. He begins to realize that war is more than patriotism and public display. He understands the seriousness of his mother’s comment in the previous chapter that Lincoln must pick between two fearsome choices. Jethro feels conflicted. The family debate not only serves to awaken Jethro’s realization, but also describes to the reader that in the animosity between North and South, neither side is entirely right or wrong.

Chapter 2 thereby establishes the flow of the novel. Rather than being a mere historical backdrop, the events of the Civil War actually drive the action of the story. The family exchange over dinner is typical of the arguments of the time. Shad’s report about the attack on Fort Sumter briefly, but accurately describes the events surrounding the attack. Even Wilse’s seemingly biased comments are interpretations of the historically supported motives and purposes behind Lincoln’s plan to resupply the fort. The comment, “Not from seven of ‘em,” shows that Wilse knows there are seven Southern states confirmed against Lincoln that will fight the seventy-five thousand volunteers the President has summoned.

The remainder of the novel, though fiction, is the result of Hunt’s extensive historical research and the stories from her grandfather who lived Jethro’s part during the American Civil War.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Jethro Creighton – Nine-year-old Jethro is a boy, his mother's helper, for the first April of the novel. The start of the war is the start of his accelerated transition from boy to man. He is the only son who does not go off to war and is left to completely take over the responsibilities of the farm and the family, especially after his father experiences a heart attack. He follows the political and strategic aspects of the war through newspaper stories, conversations, and letters from his brothers and cousin who are fighting. These same letters also involve Jethro in the emotional aspects of the war as he reads of the horrors and tries to shield his family from the devastation. The death of President Lincoln, Jethro's hero, all but undoes the boy, until the return of his friend and teacher, Shadrach Yale, and his dear sister, Jenny, bring back hope that the future holds promise. By the end of the book, Jethro has lost his innocence, but gained the experience and understanding of manhood.

Jenny Creighton – Jenny is Jethro's fourteen-year-old sister and his only sibling at home. The two are constant companions and grow to know each other's feelings as they work the farm side by side and.....

Additional major characters are analyzed in the complete study guide.

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The plot is at once a chronological history of the Civil War and a narrative about coming of age during a time of war. Historic events are used as topics of conversation, a basis for letters from soldiers, or as a background for the feelings and actions of the characters. Certain characters, notably Cousin Wilse Graham, are merely names, who function as a voice to impart to the reader the historical foundation for the next events or the next conversation. It is in keeping with Hunt's focus on teaching history through literature that the events of the war drive the plot. The reader experiences everything from the firing on Fort Sumter to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln through the eyes of a small rural community.

As the novel progresses, each chapter portrays a perceptible step in Jethro's development, using dialog, responses to emotional situations, and concern with the war to indicate the progress of Jethro's growth into a man. In Chapter 1, the adults are concerned with the war while Jethro's attention is focused on springtime and good food. Chapter 2 has the adults arguing and taking sides, with Jethro becoming.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

Bond of Family - The prevailing theme is the bond of family. The Creightons suffer many hardships, even the death of children, yet never lose hold of their ability to interact warmly. Daily family dinners are always special and made more special with the arrival of extended family. People outside of the nuclear family, Eb Carron and Shadrach Yale, are welcomed and treated with affection. Ellen Creighton is proud of her family's closeness and intervenes when tension builds. She does not betray Jethro's newfound manhood by

Additional themes are analyzed in the complete study guide.

POINT OF VIEW

The story is narrated in third person. The anonymous voice simultaneously chronicles the history of the Civil War and subjectively follows Jethro's transition of boy to man. Though fiction, most events are.....

OTHER ELEMENTS

DIALECT

The use of dialect in *Across Five Aprils* serves not only to set the scene of the rural South, but also to express the differing levels of ignorance of the characters. Most of the characters, because of the time in history and

their rural upbringing, use less than perfect English. The author uses dialectal spelling (ex. *yore* for *your*) and colloquialisms in the dialog to confer a homey accent. In Jethro's words,

"I heerd some of the big fellers talkin' the other night, and they said the war, even if it comes, will be no more than a breakfas' spell. They said that soldiers up here kin take....."

IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS - QUOTES AND ANALYSIS

[Note: Page numbers are from the paperback, Berkley edition/March 1986.]

1) "*Shad's leavin' fer Newton now. I guess Jenny has to say good-bye like as if he was goin' to the North Pole*" (p.9)

This lighthearted comment, spoken by Jethro, shows his childishness and immaturity before the war. It also illustrates his undeveloped use of English and the author's use of dialect.

2) "*War meant loud brass music and shining horses ridden by men wearing uniforms finer than any suit in the stores at Newton; it meant men riding like kings, looking neither to the right nor the left, while lesser men in perfect lines strode along with guns across their shoulders, their heads held high like horses with short reins.*" (p. 15)

This excerpt explains Jethro's initial impression of war. At this point he is confident that his brothers will dress up, fight, and come home safely. Death will only come to distant strangers.....

Ten quotations are analyzed in the complete study guide.

SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY /SYMBOLS

Coffee – Coffee is a symbol of adulthood. In Chapter 1 Jethro gets only a taste of coffee on his brother's bread. This symbolizes that he is still a child, but is on the verge of maturing. In Chapter 2, when he feels upset Jenny gives him milk, again symbolizing that he is still a child. But before his trip to Newton (Ch. 5), where he is expected to carry out a man's responsibilities, Jenny makes him coffee. It is also.....

Additional symbols are discussed in the complete study guide.

IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

Title - *Across Five Aprils* by Irene Hunt

First Published - 1964

Type of Novel – historical fiction

Setting – the Creighton farm in southern Illinois

Protagonist – Jethro Creighton.....

STUDY QUESTIONS - MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

- Who is Shadrach?
A. Jethro's oldest brother B. a neighbor C. Jethro's teacher and friend
- Who is Eb Carron?
A. Jethro's cousin B. a neighbor C. Jethro's best friend.....

Answer Key

1) C 2) A 3) C 4) B 5) C 6) B 7) A 8) A 9) B 10) C 11) A 12) C 13) B 14) C 15) C

ESSAY TOPIC IDEAS / BOOK REPORT TOPICS

1. Discuss the author's choice of the title *Across Five Aprils*.

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2. Describe Jethro's transition from boy to man using specific examples from the story.....

END OF SAMPLE MONKEYNOTES EXCERPTS

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