

The Witch of Blackbird Pond by Elizabeth George Speare

Kit Tyler is orphaned in the Caribbean islands and sent to live with relatives on the bleak shores of a Connecticut colony. The Puritan community looks upon her with suspicion as she tries to fit in. The only place Kit feels at home is in the meadows, where she meets an old Quaker woman who's allegedly a witch. The association casts doubt on Kit's character and she is accused of witchcraft herself.

Questions for Discussion:

1. This story is considered historical fiction. When and where did it take place?
2. What were the major events happening during this time in history?
3. What are some of the personal conflicts Kit faces?
4. Does she act within the governing laws at the time? Why or why not?
5. Is it ever justifiable to break a law or rule?
6. If you had been in her position, what would you have done?
7. Why does Kit feel she doesn't belong?
8. Have you ever felt the same way?
9. How do her feelings change throughout the story and why?
10. How do her actions impact the community?
11. Would you consider her influence positive or negative? Why?

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Activity:

The Trial Scene has been written as a screenplay for you to reenact. The script is below.

The Trial of Katherine Tyler

Captain Talcott: Good folk, we will proceed at once to the business at hand. We have come here in order to inquire and search into the matter of Mistress Katherine Tyler, lately of Barbados, who is accused by sundry witnesses of the practice of witchcraft. Mistress Tyler will come forward.

You will listen to the charge against you.

Clerk: Katherine Tyler, thou art here accused that not having the fear of God before thine eyes thou hast had familiarity with Satan the grand enemy of God and man, and that by his instigation and help thou hast in a preternatural way afflicted and done harm to the bodies and estates of sundry of His Majesty's subjects, in the third year of His Majesty's reign, for which by the law of God and the law of the Colony thou deservest to die.

Mistress Tyler, you are accused by Adam Cruff with the following actions. Firstly, that you were the familiar friend and companion of the Widow Hannah Tupper of Blackbird Pond, an alleged witch who has within the past week disappeared in a suspicious manner. Such friendship is a lawful test of guilt, inasmuch as it is well known that witchcraft is an art that may be learned and conveyed from one person to another, and that it has often fallen out that a witch, upon dying, leaveth some heir to her witchcraft.

Secondly, that you are guilty of actions and works which infer a court with the devil, which have caused illness and death to fall upon many innocent children in this town.

Captain Talcott: Mistress Tyler you have heard the complaints against you. We will proceed with the first accusation. Is it true that you were a friend and companion of the Widow Tupper?

Kit: Yes, sir.

Captain: Is it true that on sundry occasions during the summer you have entered her house and visited with her?

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Kit: Yes, sir.

Captain: Is it true that you were also acquainted with a certain cat which the widow entertained as a familiar spirit?

Kit: It was just an ordinary cat, sir, like any cat.

Captain: You will answer yes or no. Is it true that you have engaged with the Widow Tupper in various enchantments with the intent of causing mischief to certain people?

Kit: Oh no, sir! I don't know what you mean by enchantments.

Captain: Do you deny that on a certain day in August last, on passing the pasture of Goodman Whittlesley you cast a spell upon his cattle so that they were rooted to the ground where they stood and refused to answer his call or to give any milk on that evening?

Kit: I don't understand, sir. How could I do such a thing?

Captain: Goodman Whittlesley, will you repeat your complaint for this assembly?

Matthew Wood: I protest to this mockery! Not one word of this nonsense could be proved in the Court of Assistants. There is not one shred of lawful evidence in the lot! I beg you, Sam Talcott, make an end to it!

Captain: Do I infer that you are willing to vouch for your niece's good character, Matthew Wood?

Matthew: Certainly. I will vouch for it.

Captain: We are to understand then that these visits to the Widow Tupper were taken with your approval?

Matthew: No, I had no knowledge of them.

Captain: Did you ever, at any time, indicate to your niece that she was not to associate with this woman?

Matthew: Yes, I forbade her to go.

Captain: Then the girl has been disobedient and deceitful.

Matthew: The girl has been thoughtless and headstrong at times. But her upbringing has been such as to encourage that.

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- Captain:** You admit then that her education has been irregular?
- Matthew:** You can twist what I say as you will, Sam Talcott. But I swear before all present, on my word as a freeman of the colony, that the girl is no witch.
- Captain:** We are obliged to listen to the testimony, Matthew. I will thank you to keep silent. What is your opinion of the case, Dr. Bulkeley?
- Dr. Buckeley:** In my opinion, it is necessary to use the greatest caution in the matter of testimony. Since the unnatural events so far recounted appear to rest in each case upon the word of but one witness, the legality of any one of them is open to question.
- Matthew:** It is ridiculous to talk of legality. There has not one word been spoken that makes sense!
- Goodman Cruff:** Sir, I've summat to say as makes sense, and there's more than one witness to prove it. I've got summat here as was found in the widow's house that night.
- Goodwife Cruff:** Look at that! What do you say about that? My Prudence's name, written over and over. 'Tis a spell, that's what it is! A mercy the child is alive today. Another hour and she'd have been dying like the others!
- Captain:** Do you recognize this book, Mistress Tyler?
- Kit:** Yes sir.
- Captain:** Did you write this name?
- Kit:** Yes sir, I wrote the name.
- Captain:** Why should you write a child's name over and over like that?
- Kit:** I can't tell you sir.
- Captain:** Mistress Tyler, I had considered this morning's inquiry merely a formality. I did not expect to find any evidence worthy of carrying to the court. But this is a serious matter. You must explain to us how this child's name came to be written.
- Goodwife Cruff:** She's a witch! She's as good as admitted it! Hanging's too good for her!
- Captain:** Silence! This is the Colony of Connecticut! Every man and woman is entitled to a trial before a jury. This case will be turned over to the General Session in Hartford. The inquiry is dismissed.

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Clerk: Hold on a minute, Captain. There's a fellow here says he has an important witness for the case.

Enter Prudence Cruff

Goodwife Cruff: Take her out of here! The witch will put an evil eye on her!

Captain: Stand back! The child is protected here.

Kit: Oh please sir, let them take her away! It is all my fault! I would do anything to undo it if I could! I never meant any harm, but I'm responsible for all of it. Please take me to Hartford. Do what you want with me. But oh – I beg you – send Prudence away from this horrible place!

Captain: 'Tis a trifle late to think about the child. Come here, child.

Will you stand there, child, in front of the table?
We will ask you some questions, Prudence. You will answer them as truthfully as you possibly can. Do you understand?

Prudence: Yes sir.

Captain: Do you know this young woman?

Prudence: Yes sir. She is my teacher. She taught me to read.

Captain: Where did she teach you?

Prudence: At Hannah's house in the meadow.

Captain: You mean Mistress Tyler took you to Hannah Tupper's house?

Prudence: The first time she took me there. After that I went by myself.

Goodwife Cruff: The little weasel! That's where she was all those days. I'll see that girl hung.

Captain: Have you ever seen this book before?

Prudence: Oh, yes sir. Kit gave it to me. I wrote my name in it.

Captain: (to Kit) Is it true that the child wrote her own name in this book?

Kit: 'Tis true. I wrote it once for her and then she copied it.

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Goodwife Cruff: You can't take her word for anything, sir. The child don't know what she's saying. I might as well tell it, Prudence has never been what you call bright. She never could learn much.

Captain: Could you write your name again, do you think?

Prudence: I think so, sir.

Prudence writes her name.

Goodman Cruff: Is that proper writing? Prudence Cruff, does it say, right out as it should?

Dr. Bulkeley: Very proper writing, I should say, for a child with no learning.

Captain: Now, Prudence, you say that Mistress Tyler taught you to read?

Goodwife Cruff: What sort of reading? Magic spells and signs I tell you! The child would never know the difference.

Dr. Bulkeley: That will be easy enough to prove. What can you read, child?

Prudence: I can read the Bible.

Dr. Bulkeley hands the open Bible to Prudence.

'The father of the righteous shall greatly rejoice; and he that begeth a wish child have joy of him. Thy father and mother shall be glad, and she that bare thee shall rejoice.'

Goodman Cruff: Did you hear that? That was real good reading. I'd like to see any boy do better!

Goodwife Cruff: It's a trick! That child could never read a word in her life! She's bewitched, I tell you!

Goodman Cruff: Hold your tongue, woman. I'm sick and tired of hearing about Prudence being bewitched. All these years you been telling me our child was half-witted. Why, she's smart as a whip. I bet it warn't much of a trick to teach her to read.

All my life I've wished I could read. If I'd had a son, I'd of seen to it he learned his letters. Well, this is a new country over here, and who says it may not be just as needful for a woman to read as a man? Might give her summat to think about besides witches and foolishness. Any rate, I got someone now to read the Good Book to me of an evening, and if that's the

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work of the devil, then I say 'tis a mighty queer thing for the devil to go working against himself!

Captain: I take it then, Goodman Cruff, that you withdraw your charges against this young woman?

Goodman Cruff: Yes. I'll withdraw the charges.

Captain: There seems to be no evidence of witchcraft. The girl has admitted her wrong in encouraging a child to willful disobedience. Beyond that I cannot see that there is any reasonable charge against her. I pronounce that Mistress Katherine Tyler is free and innocent.