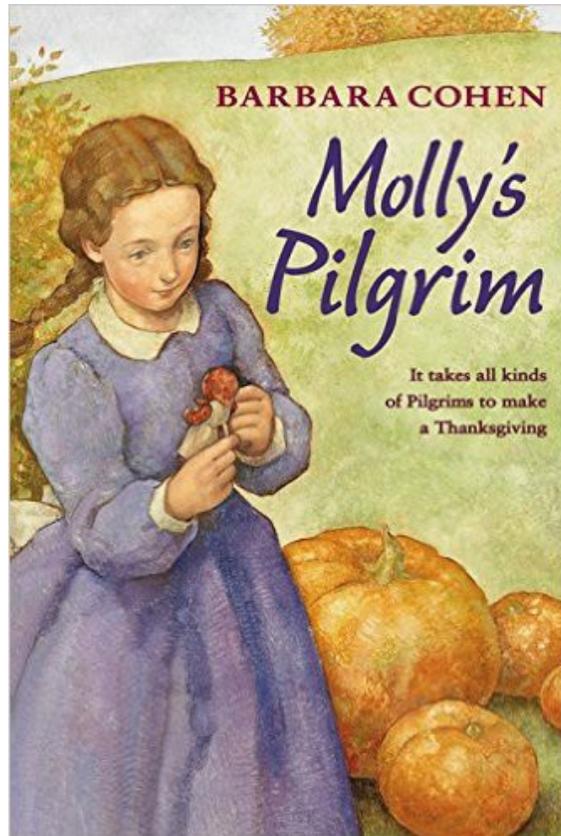


Literature Guide for Barbara Cohen's

Molly's Pilgrim



by Robin M. Huntley

Summary

Set in the early 20th century, Molly's Pilgrim illuminates the multiple meanings and cultural roots of the word pilgrim. The story features a Jewish family who immigrated to the United States from Russia, likely to flee the pogroms. Molly, the title character, has just moved with her parents to a small and culturally homogenous community. She doesn't yet speak English fluently, and her parents are even less fluent than she is. Molly's biggest challenge is fitting in at school. As the only Jewish student, she is teased and taunted for her difference in appearance, her accent, and her lack of knowledge about American cultural traditions – especially Thanksgiving.

Molly is first outed as not having the same cultural knowledge as her peers when she asks what Thanksgiving is while reading aloud from a textbook. The very same peers who had previously teased her for her looks can't believe that anyone wouldn't know about Thanksgiving; it has not occurred to them that there might be people in the world who don't celebrate traditional American holidays. Later, when the Thanksgiving holiday rolls around, Molly's very traditional teacher assigns the class the task of building a replica of the village in Plymouth where the pilgrims celebrated their first Thanksgiving. Molly's mother creates a unique doll for the village based on Molly's description of what a pilgrim is – a person who came to America from far away. She makes a beautiful doll, and though it doesn't match the pictures that Molly has seen of the pilgrims, she can't bring herself to explain to her mother that it's not quite right. After all, her mother made the doll to look like herself as a young girl since she and her family have come to America from far away.

Already embarrassed to have outed herself as being new to American traditions, Molly is afraid to share her doll at school. When she finally does, her peers react exactly as she expected, but she discovers that despite what her classmates think, her doll teaches an important lesson. The pilgrims who began the American tradition of Thanksgiving came to North America in search of religious freedom – which is exactly what Molly's family sought when they left Russia. Molly's class learns that if a pilgrim is someone who comes to America in search of religious freedom, then Molly and her

family are pilgrims, and her doll is welcome in the village.

Readers of all ages can gain meaningful insight from Molly's experiences. The story challenges readers to question the traditional notion of what it means to be a pilgrim, and reminds readers of the many different ways in which families have made their way to the United States. In presenting an alternative perspective on what it means to be a pilgrim, author Barbara Cohen helps to bring new meaning to the celebration of Thanksgiving. Not only can the holiday be used to give thanks for the things we're grateful for, but it can serve as a time to remember and honor those who have sought refuge in our country – for religious reasons or otherwise.

Critical Thinking Questions

The questions listed are written to support readers ages 7-9 in deepening their understanding of the story. Best when asked while the book is being read, the questions can help readers to process the events that take place, as well as the characters' reactions and emotions. Some of the critical thinking questions can also support readers in activating schema about their own culture and that of others in order to connect to Molly and her family. The critical thinking questions could also be used to spark written reading responses after the story has been read.

- Not only is Molly teased by her peers for being different, she is new to American culture and the English language. How do you think she feels about all of the newness?
- If you were a student at Molly's school, how would you treat her when she arrived for the first time? What could you do to help her feel more comfortable in a new place?
- Molly's family has had to leave their home in Russia, and they cannot return. What do you think it would be like to leave your home suddenly, knowing that you couldn't go back?
- Why do you think Molly doesn't know what Thanksgiving is? Why do you think she didn't keep it to herself when she didn't know?

- Why do you think Molly doesn't tell her mother how she really feels about the doll?
- What do you think Elizabeth and her friends learned from Molly's doll? Do you think that they would act differently if another student like Molly came to their school?
- If Molly's mother could have come to speak to her class, what do you think she would teach them about what it means to be a pilgrim?

Mini-Lesson

Designed for use with 8-year-old (3rd grade) readers, this mini-lesson blends cultural studies and world languages with the use of context to determine the meaning of words. Beginning with a study of the Yiddish words that Molly's mother uses within the story and expanding to a small study of basic Yiddish vocabulary, the lesson challenges readers to think about the role that words play on their own and in combination with others. The author has included the Yiddish words within conversations between Molly and her mother in order to share an element of the family's culture with readers. Now, readers will use this lesson on Yiddish language and Jewish culture to deepen their understanding of context.

Yiddish in Context

1. While reading Molly's Pilgrim, ask readers to point out moments when unfamiliar, non-English words arise in the text. Make a list that can be seen by all readers (chalk board, white board, chart paper, etc.) to refer to when the story has been finished.
2. After reading the book, discuss the idea of context – the circumstances in which something is said which help us to understand its meaning. Give a kid-friendly example, such as the use of the phrase “fasten your seat belts” meaning to buckle up when you're in the car, but meaning that you should be ready for something exciting if it's used outside of a car.

3. Ask readers to re-visit the list of sentences including Yiddish words. Ask readers to use the context in which each statement was made in order to make an educated guess about the meaning of each of the words. Look back in the book to help readers remember the specific details of each moment if necessary. (An alternative to doing this portion of the lesson as a group activity would be to create a worksheet or concept map including the sentences with Yiddish words and asking readers to work on their own or with partners to write about what they think the meanings could be and why. If you choose this option, be sure to do one sentence together so that readers are certain of what the task entails.)
4. After readers have considered the possible meanings of each of the words, share their true meaning and allow readers to compare their thinking to the translations. Ask readers to self-assess: were they close to the true meaning? Were they far away? Were their guesses reasonable?
5. (Optional) Create a list of Yiddish words and phrases that readers can use to replace common words and phrases from their everyday vocabulary. Give 1-3 words or phrases to each student, and allow them to develop sentences in which the words and phrases can be used. Have readers challenge each other to determine the meaning of their words and phrases through context clues by sharing their sentences with the group.

Extension Activities

Designed for readers ages 7-9, these extension activities connect to themes found within Molly's Pilgrim. Each of the activities builds on an idea presented in the story, and allows readers to explore new ideas using the story as an entry point. The activities have been written loosely so as to be easily adaptable for readers of all ages. Additionally, the activities may be easily adapted to pair with stories sharing similar themes.

Thanksgiving Around the World

In the story, Molly's classmates are surprised to find out that not everyone celebrates “American” holidays. Though Americans see Thanksgiving as their own because its roots lie in American history, there are many countries and cultures around the world who celebrate some kind of Thanksgiving. In Canada, Thanksgiving takes place earlier in the fall than American Thanksgiving. A form of Thanksgiving is celebrated in Liberia, a country established by former slaves held by American plantation owners. In the Jewish religion, sukkot – the holiday mentioned in Molly's Pilgrim – was originally celebrated as way of giving thanks for the fruit harvest. Research the many different cultures, countries, and religions around the world that celebrate their own version of American Thanksgiving. Look for similarities and differences between the celebrations, and see if you can find a common thread!

What Were the Pogroms?

Throughout the history of Judaism, there have been many times in which Jews have experienced religious persecution. In Molly's Pilgrim, her family has found their way to the United States as a means of escaping the pogroms, a time period during the late 18th and early 19th centuries where Russian Jews suffered extreme violence and anti-semitism. In Russian, the word “pogrom” literally means to wreak havoc or to demolish violently, and the word aptly describes what Russian Jews experienced during this time period. Search for child-friendly resources that teach about this time period, or research on your own and create child-friendly resources of your own. While it's not necessary to expose children to the extreme violence that Russian Jews were subjected to, it's possible to teach about the intolerance, disrespect, and lack of compassion that made the pogroms what they were.

Pilgrims of All Shapes and Sizes

By Molly's mother's definition, a pilgrim is someone who has come to America from far away. By Molly's teacher's definition, a pilgrim is someone who has come to America in search of religious freedom. Throughout our country's history, many different groups of people have come from far away, some of them for religious reasons and many of them for other reasons. Create your own pilgrim village in the spirit of these two new interpretations of the word pilgrim! Research immigration in the United States, and create dolls to represent the many different cultures and religions that have made their way to our country from elsewhere. Be sure to look at modern waves of immigration, and find out where immigrants to your own community might be coming from.

Yiddish Children's Literature

The Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, MA offers an online collection of Yiddish children's literature (link below). Made up of over 800 titles – most of which are rare – the collection has everything from school primers to bedtime stories. The collection *isn't* filled with Yiddish versions of familiar stories like Goodnight Moon, Green Eggs and Ham, or even Molly's Pilgrim, but it does present itself as a fascinating resource for exposure to Yiddish language and the ways in which it is shared with children. English-speaking readers can browse selections from the catalog and look for similarities between what they see in Yiddish children's literature to what they've seen in modern English children's literature.

<http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-book-centers-noah-cotsen-library-yiddish-childrens-literature>