

M. C. Higgins, The Great

by Virginia Hamilton

Classroom Favorites



Teacher's Guide by Joyce McAlpine

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Synopsis

Mayo Cornelius Higgins (better known as M.C.) is a 13-year-old boy who lives high atop Sarah's Mountain in a remote area of southern Ohio. M.C. has assigned himself the task of getting his family away from the impending dangers created by strip mining.

M.C.'s great grandmother Sarah (an escaped slave) had stumbled upon the mountain during a dense fog. M.C. is very proud that his family owns the mountain named for his ancestor. However, M.C. is torn between his love for the mountain and his fear of the huge spoil heap (waste material left after digging for coal) sliding down and covering the ledge where their home is located.

When word that a talent scout was interested in discovering new singers from the area reaches M.C., he begins to plan. He places all hopes of escaping the spoil heap on the chance that James Lewis (the talent scout) is going to want his mother to leave the mountain to become a recording star. He reasons that the family couldn't let Banina (his mother) go alone, thus the entire family would leave the mountain.

When M.C. finally meets James Lewis, his fears are reinforced as Lewis visits the spoil heap and predicts its movement in the near future. This intensifies his desire to leave the mountain.

M.C. is the proud owner of a forty-foot steel pole that is positioned in the middle of a junk heap in their yard. To the top of this pole, M.C. has attached a bicycle seat, pedals and two tricycle wheels. He is very possessive of this pole and allows no one else to try to climb to his seat. M.C. spends numerous hours perched in the seat, swaying back and forth. From his perch he can keep an eye on his younger brothers and sister swimming in the lake, he can also see the nearest town, the surrounding hills, mountains and anyone who climbs Sarah's Mountain.

M.C. and his friend, Ben Killburn meet secretly because M.C.'s family believes that Ben and his relatives possess strange powers and are witches. Ben and his relatives, although they do possess the common trait that gives each a sixth finger and toe, are quite normal. The Killburns, like many African Americans and Southerners, use old fashioned methods for healing purposes. Also, the Killburn family members have light complexions and light reddish hair. However, it seems as though they have no eyebrows (the hair is so fair) and each has light eyes. Such differences add to the Higgins' fear of them.

Conflicts are the norm in M.C.'s relationship with his father, therefore he hides his friendship with Ben. M.C. learns during a conversation

with his mother that his hope of the family leaving the mountain will not materialize. Banina reveals why Jones (M.C.'s father) would never leave. Jones' ancestors, including Sarah, are buried on the very site where M.C.'s pole is positioned. At Banina's insistence, Jones had removed the stones, in their place he had hauled pieces of junk cars up the mountain and piled them where the stones had been. In this way he had created a monument to the dead, and refused to leave them. When presented with this information, M.C. simply decides to leave Jones behind.

In the woods one dark evening, M.C. decides to sneak up on a stranger using a lantern to find the way. He meets his match when a feisty teenager, Lurhetta Outlaw, doesn't fall into his trap. M.C. finds Lurhetta attractive and feels he'll never be the same. She, however, challenges him at every chance, belittling him about everything from his age to his family's bias toward the Killburns. Due to Lurhetta's taunts he defies his father and visits the Killburn place.

Hard, cold reality begins to take hold of M.C. when James Lewis reveals that he never truly intended to make a star of Banina. He was simply gathering recordings.

M.C. feels betrayed but still has a glimmer of hope that he will have Lurhetta's friendship. His second disappointment comes when he discovers Lurhetta has deserted her lake campsite without saying goodbye, thus dashing his hopes of a continuing relationship.

M.C. finally accepts defeat in trying to leave the mountain. But he decides he can do something to alter fate. He decides to build a wall at the back of the house as a measure of protection from the collapse. When Jones sees what M.C. is doing he offers advice. M.C. immediately rejects his suggestions, asserting that he will work for Mr. Killburn, and will be friends with whomever he wishes. He then calls for his friend Ben, who always hides somewhere nearby, to come out into the open. M.C. is ready to defend his right to befriend Ben, even if it means using his knife on his father.

Biographical Sketch

Virginia Hamilton was born on March 12, 1936. She was raised in Yellow Springs, Ohio and attended Antioch College. She began writing stories at an early age.

Ms. Hamilton has produced many works for children and is recognized as one of the most influential authors of books about Black children. She is also credited with being one of the top image makers

for Black Americans.

Ms. Hamilton has received numerous awards and honors for her writing. She received the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award, Boston Globe-Horn Book Award, John Newbery Medal and the National Book Award, all for *M.C. Higgins, The Great*.

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Critic's Corner

M.C. Higgins, The Great presents an extensive picture of life from a young, impressionable boy's viewpoint. Ms. Hamilton has allowed the readers to identify and empathize with characters who appear different and are isolated from society. Ms. Hamilton also provides readers with the knowledge that even though one is different, there are still commonalities between individuals. Ms. Hamilton allows us to watch as a youngster matures enough to note that he can determine his future and his relationships.

Objectives

1. To understand the motivation of the main character
2. To interpret the relationship between M.C. and his father
3. To analyze the nature of superstition and its influence on the behavior of man
4. To examine the concepts of optimism, realism and pessimism
5. To examine the maturation of a young boy as he moves from dependent to independent decision making

Meaning Study

Students may be assigned to define words or the teacher can supply definitions. Page numbers are given so words and terms may be referred to in context.

1. furtively (p. 1) *done or acting in a sly, secretive manner*
2. commenced (p. 1) *began*
3. clammy (p. 1) *moist, cold and slightly clinging to the touch*
4. gallery (p. 1) *a covered walk or porch open at one side or having the roof supported by pillars*
5. lithe (p. 3) *limber, moving easily*
6. ravine (p. 5) *a long, deep hollow in the earth's surface, worn by the action of a stream*
7. lure (p. 6) *anything that tempts or attracts*
8. spoil heap (p. 15) *a huge mound of waste material, subsoil, left over after digging for coal*
9. cirque (p. 28) *a natural amphitheater, a level place surrounded by rising ground, created by erosion*
10. menace (p. 39) *any threatening harm or evil*
11. impelling (p. 52) *to push, to move forward*

12. yodel (p. 52) *to sing with sudden alternating changes between the normal voice and falsetto*
13. reverie (p. 66) *a dreamy sort of thinking or imagining, especially of agreeable things*
14. second sight (p. 75) *the supposed ability to see that which cannot normally be seen, such as future events, supernatural objects, etc.*
15. strata (p. 210) *a horizontal layer or section of material where several layers are piled upon each other*
16. patina (p. 210) *any thin coating or color change resulting from age, as on old wood*
17. hub (p. 219) *a center of interest, importance, or activity*

Comprehension Study

Page numbers refer to location of answers.

1. Why did M.C. have a bracelet of lettuce leaves bound to his wrists? (p. 6)
The lettuce was to be used as a lure in his traps.
2. Why was M.C. up and about at such an early hour? (p. 3)
He was checking his traps and then waiting for the new dude to arrive.
3. What problem did M.C. have for which he figured the dude could supply the answer? (p. 3)
M.C. wanted to get his family off the mountain.
4. What did M.C. fantasize was going to happen when the dude heard his mother sing? (p. 3-4)
The dude would make his mother a singing star and the family would have to travel with her.
5. How long has it been since the strip mining operations began? (p. 13)
The mining started two years ago.
6. Describe M.C.'s prize and how he used it. (p. 23-26)
His prize is a 40-foot steel pole to which he attached a bicycle seat and pedals at the top. He climbs to the top, pedals and sways on the pole as he views everything around him.
7. How had M.C. won the prize? (p. 4-5, 23)
He swam the Ohio River.
8. What made Ben's hands appear to be "witchey?" (p. 11)
He had 6 fingers on each hand.
9. Describe the relationship between M.C. and Jones, using the events from pages 58-64 of the text.
Their relationship seemed to be a playful comradeship, one that allowed M.C. to play practical jokes on Jones.
10. Describe M.C.'s room in detail (p. 65)
M.C.'s room was a cave dug out of Sarah's Mountain. The walls were plastered, oak beams braced the ceiling; an oak bed, no windows, and a hanging light bulb completed the room.
11. What was the significance of the pole and the surrounding junk car parts? (p. 105-106)
Jones looked upon them as a monument for the graves of his ancestors.
12. What dangerous prank did Lurhetta pull on M.C.? (p. 155-165)
Lurhetta let M.C. lead her through the underwater tunnel without telling him she couldn't swim.

13. When Lurhetta was introduced to M.C.'s family, why was she unwilling to tell her name? (p. 186)
She was unwilling to tell her name because people either laughed or didn't believe her.
14. Explain the way mountain people felt about asking questions. (p. 189)
In the hills, people ask no questions so no one feels forced to give information in return.
15. Describe the icemen's visit and Jones' reaction to them. (p. 190-195)
Answers will vary based on the following facts: 3 icemen announce their presence with a yell. They are Killburns (and so possess the Killburn characteristics). Burlap capes cover their backs, they carry 50-pound blocks of ice using tongs on their backs and maintain a peculiar stance. They figure the price in sign language. Jones was afraid of the witchey men, didn't want them to close to the house or himself.
16. What prompted M.C. to visit the Killburn place? (p. 210)
M.C. went because of Lurhetta's taunts.
17. What was the general impression you received from the description of Ben's family? (p. 210-238)
They were normal, hard working people, who happened to look and live differently from their neighbors.

Student Activities

1. Research the subject of superstition.
 - a) Identify several superstitions and how people act accordingly.
 - b) Conduct a survey of family, friends, neighbors and people at random (with adult supervision). Ask questions about the person's superstitious beliefs and the degree to which they conform to the belief.
 - c) Compile a summary of the findings and present it to the class. (This can be done as individuals or in groups.)
2. Explain the concepts of optimism, realism and pessimism as ways of describing a person's outlook on life. Give examples for each. Have students identify the type they characterize or have a friend or classmate identify student's type from observations.
3. Present a science lesson and/or have students research the topic of strip mining. Identify the process followed and the resultant problems.
4. Use a map of the U.S. to mark all locations mentioned in the text.
5. Write/create a different ending to the book or continue the story.

M.C. HIGGINS, THE GREAT TEST

VOCABULARY TEST

Directions: Match the underlined word with a word of similar meaning from the list below.

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| A. using caution | H. slyly, secretly | N. covered walk |
| B. a temptation, attraction | I. shamelessly | O. waste material from coal digging |
| C. limber | J. a hollow created by a stream's movement | P. ease of movement |
| D. strange, frightening | K. moist, damp | Q. ability to see future events |
| E. a level place | L. a type of singing | R. threatening harm |
| F. layers | M. evergreen trees | S. began |
| G. suddenly, spontaneously | | T. imagining |

- ___ 1. He glanced furtively around.
- ___ 2. Like bracelets of green feathers, the leaves commenced to wave.
- ___ 3. In seconds, his skin grew clammy.
- ___ 4. As he stood on the gallery of his home . . .
- ___ 5. He fell into a kind of reverie as he heard, deep in his mind, a wild creature's roar.
- ___ 6. All of her natural grace came into play, helping her manage the awkward climb.
- ___ 7. The strata of rock were worn smooth from years of barefoot climbing and descending . . .
- ___ 8. I know you have to get out from under the spoil heap.
- ___ 9. Jones could convince himself at odd moments that the boy had second sight.
- ___ 10. M.C. called an odd impelling yodel over to the lake in the cirque . . .
- ___ 11. An abundance of trees grew up from the bottom of the ravine, blocking his view.
- ___ 12. Over there was a lake nestled in a cirque, a natural amphitheater between foothills.
- ___ 13. But his motions remained lithe and natural, as he moved easily among trees and shade.
- ___ 14. . . . he saw that his lure of lettuce was still in place and rotting from two days of heat.
- ___ 15. . . . it didn't paralyze him with fear the way it once had . . . it had no plunge and roar of menace.
- ___ 16. Impulsively, he kissed her lightly on the lips . . .
- ___ 17. She kicked at him . . . "Hey," he said now grinning with the triumph . . . Yet his mind remained sharp, wary, a hunter's mind.
- ___ 18. It was an eerie time in which trees and undergrowth appeared changed and ghostly.
- ___ 19. " . . . You fixing to let him jump Banina Higgins right there in the piney woods?"
- ___ 20. In a bewildering rush of shame, he felt foolish at having brazenly kissed her.

COMPREHENSION TEST A

PART I: Character Identification (2 points each)

Directions: Match each descriptive statement with the character it describes.

- | | |
|---|--------------------|
| ___ 1. M.C.'s younger sister | A. M.C. |
| ___ 2. his ancestor had been an escaped slave | B. Banina |
| ___ 3. a friend of M.C.'s who happened to be a member of the "witchey" family | C. Jones |
| ___ 4. the dude with the suede shoes and the tape recorder | D. Ben |
| ___ 5. a young man in his early teens who takes on a huge responsibility | E. Viola Killburn |
| ___ 6. a teenage girl, driving around alone, she enjoys teasing M.C. | F. Killburn family |
| ___ 7. an escaped slave who found her way to the mountain in dense fog, carrying a baby | G. Lurhetta Outlaw |
| ___ 8. a woman who healed an open, bleeding wound and never touched it | H. James K. Lewis |
| ___ 9. an attractive, middle-aged female, possessing a beautiful singing voice | I. Sarah |
| ___ 10. a family who's characteristics include light skin, red hair, grey eyes and six fingers and toes | J. Macie Pearl |

PART II: True/False (2 points each)

Directions: Write T for each statement that is true, F for those that are false.

- ___ 1. Jones doesn't understand the extent of danger the spoil heap presents for the family.
- ___ 2. M.C.'s pole was actually intended as a present for his brother Lennie.
- ___ 3. M.C. wants to leave the mountain so badly that he would desert his father to do so.
- ___ 4. M.C. uses a rope to pull himself to the top of the pole.
- ___ 5. M.C. does not allow anyone to ride his pole.
- ___ 6. Ben and M.C.'s friendship is in jeopardy because both boys like Lurhetta.
- ___ 7. The Killburns are dangerous people.
- ___ 8. Some people fear the Killburns because each has six fingers.
- ___ 9. M.C. and Jones are never friendly toward one another.
- ___ 10. Jones had built huge headstones for each of his ancestor's graves.
- ___ 11. The Killburn's extended family serves as an added difference for their neighbors.
- ___ 12. Lurhetta swam through the tunnel with M.C. just to prove that she could.
- ___ 13. Banina, like M.C., dreams of a recording career.

- ___14. Lurhetta teases M.C. because he has never left the hills.
- ___15. Lurhetta always seems older, wiser, and more self-assured than M.C.
- ___16. Lurhetta's camp site lacks evidence of having food and cooking utensils.
- ___17. The only time Jones was not afraid of the Killburns was when they tried to heal the mining slashes.
- ___18. James K. Lewis is so impressed with Banina's singing that he wants her to leave for a recording studio at once.
- ___19. Jones cares most for his wife, Banina.
- ___20. The Killburn's fields are overflowing with colorful, ripe crops.

PART III: Short Answer (5 points each)

Directions: Briefly answer the following questions.

1. Describe Sarah's Mountain.
2. What were M.C.'s feelings regarding his home and its surroundings?
3. Banina mentioned one drawback of M.C.'s growing up on Sarah's Mountain. What was it?

PART IV: Essay Questions

1. How did M.C. acquire his prize and how did he use it? (10 points)
2. Describe the relationship between Ben and M.C. (5 points)
3. What makes M.C. like other teens? What makes him different? (10 points)

COMPREHENSION TEST B

PART I: Multiple Choice (2 points each)

Directions: choose the best answer for each question

- ___ 1. M.C. and his family live in
- A. Pennsylvania
 - B. Indiana
 - C. Ohio
 - D. Kentucky
- ___ 2. M.C. wants to leave Sarah's Mountain because
- A. he wants to move closer to Lurhetta.
 - B. he wants to live in a city.
 - C. he is tired of his dad's bossing.
 - D. he recognizes the danger of the spoil heap.
- ___ 3. After whom is the mountain named?
- A. an escaped slave
 - B. a local heroine
 - C. Harenton's first female resident
 - D. a president's wife
- ___ 4. M.C. hopes the talent scout will make a star of
- A. himself.
 - B. his father.
 - C. his mother.
 - D. Lurhetta.
- ___ 5. Jones and Banina do not wish to associate with the Killburns because
- A. they're jealous.
 - B. they fear their differences.
 - C. they killed a baby trying to heal it.
 - D. they use sign language.
- ___ 6. M.C.'s pole is
- A. 20 feet high.
 - B. 30 feet high.
 - C. 40 feet high.
 - D. 50 feet high.
- ___ 7. Why won't Jones leave the mountain?
- A. feels uncomfortable elsewhere
 - B. refuses to leave his ancestors' burial site
 - C. lack of money to leave
 - D. fear of not having a job
- ___ 8. What caused Banina to think negatively of the Killburns?
- A. she believed rumors
 - B. she saw Viola Killburn use strange powers to heal a child
 - C. Banina and Viola Killburn had an argument
 - D. the Killburns stole from them
- ___ 9. Why did Lurhetta camp on Sarah's Mountain?
- A. she was vacationing with her family
 - B. she had gotten separated from a camping expedition
 - C. she had driven with James Lewis to the mountain during her wanderings
 - D. she had always wanted to see that part of the state
- ___ 10. Why was Jones afraid of the icemen?
- A. they were Killburns
 - B. they dressed strangely
 - C. they acted strangely
 - D. they didn't speak regular English
- ___ 11. What did M.C. discover about Lurhetta after the swim through the tunnel?
- A. she couldn't swim
 - B. she was a better swimmer than he
 - C. she had purposely tried to drown him
- ___ 12. What type of age difference existed between M.C. and Lurhetta?
- A. they were the same age
 - B. he was older
 - C. she was older
- ___ 13. James Lewis had come to record local singers in order to
- A. find new talent.
 - B. publish a book containing original country songs.
 - C. find new songs to have stars record as their own.
 - D. continue his father's work.

- ___14. What factor caused Jones to install M.C.'s pole in the yard atop the mountain?
- A. he wanted M.C. to have an excellent view
 - B. so M.C. could keep an eye on the kids at the lake and home at the same time
 - C. to create a monument to his ancestors
- ___15. Which of nature's elements poses the greatest threat to the spoil heap?
- A. sunshine
 - B. wind
 - C. rain
 - D. snow
 - E. freezing temperatures
- ___16. How much time has passed since the strip mining had started?
- A. 1 year
 - B. 2 years
 - C. 3 years
 - D. 4 years
- ___17. Why had mining been allowed on top of the mountain owned by the Higgins family?
- A. Jones was tricked by the mining company
 - B. the price offered was too good to turn down
 - C. the family had not planned to remain much longer
 - D. the family did not own the land at the top of the mountain
- ___18. Lurhetta did not mind James Lewis traveling with her because
- A. people thought he was her father
 - B. he paid for the meals
 - C. she liked having company
- ___19. How did the icemen decide what price to charge for the ice?
- A. they used strange guttural tones
 - B. they wrote on paper
 - C. they used sign language
 - D. they argued quietly among themselves
- ___20. Jones entertained Lurhetta by
- A. cooking
 - B. singing
 - C. dancing
 - D. wrestling M.C.

PART II: Short Answer (5 points each)

Directions: Briefly answer the following questions.

1. Periodically during the day, the family could hear a sound generated by a business in Harenton. What was it?
2. What had the Killburns built on their land at M.C.'s suggestion?
3. What was Jones' contribution to M.C.'s final plan?
4. Why did M.C. call Ben into the yard despite his father's disapproval?

PART III: Essay (10 points each)

1. Describe M.C.'s original plan for leaving Sarah's Mountain.
2. Describe M.C.'s final plan of action that he begins to execute at the story's end.
3. Discuss the two reasons the family will not leave the mountain in the near future.
4. Compare the theories of Jones and James Lewis as to how the spoil heap will collapse.

M.C. HIGGINS, THE GREAT ANSWER KEY

Vocabulary

- | | | | |
|------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. H | 6. P | 11. J | 16. G |
| 2. S | 7. F | 12. E | 17. A |
| 3. K | 8. O | 13. C | 18. D |
| 4. N | 9. Q | 14. B | 19. M |
| 5. T | 10. L | 15. R | 20. I |

COMPREHENSION TEST A

PART I: Character Identification (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. J | 6. G |
| 2. C | 7. I |
| 3. D | 8. E |
| 4. H | 9. B |
| 5. A | 10. F |

PART II: True/False (40 points)

- | | | |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. F | 8. T | 15. F |
| 2. F | 9. F | 16. T |
| 3. T | 10. F | 17. F |
| 4. F | 11. T | 18. F |
| 5. T | 12. T | 19. T |
| 6. F | 13. F | 20. F |
| 7. F | 14. T | |

PART III: Short Answer (15 points)

1. Sarah's Mountain is steep and tree covered.
2. M.C. was proud of the family's ownership of the mountain, he loved the mountains and hills and the beauty of it all.
3. Banina was sorry that M.C. was so isolated from other people.

PART IV: Essay Questions (40 points)

1. M.C. won the prize from Jones because he successfully swam across the Ohio River. He used the pole as a retreat and a look-out post. (10 points)
2. While Ben and M.C. are good friends, M.C. seems apprehensive about Ben from time to time. Ben seems to put more effort into the friendship (he checks M.C.'s traps, gets rid of a skunk for him).
3. (Answers will vary according to the student's perceptions of the average teen.)
M.C. has the same fears of acceptance by peers, his relationships with his parents and siblings are those of any teenager. However, his acceptance of finding a solution to their problem and the decisions he makes at the book's end set him apart from other 13-year-olds.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

PART I: Multiple Choice (40 points)

- | | | | |
|------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. C | 6. C | 11. A | 16. B |
| 2. D | 7. B | 12. C | 17. D |
| 3. A | 8. B | 13. D | 18. B |
| 4. C | 9. C | 14. C | 19. C |
| 5. B | 10. A | 15. C | 20. A |

PART II: Short Answer (20 points)

1. The whistle at the steel mill to begin and end shifts and lunch.
2. A huge web-like net that connected the buildings and allowed the Killburn's to use the land for crops.
3. Jones gave M.C. Sarah's gravestone to use in building the wall.
4. He had decided to be friends with Ben openly. He wasn't going to let his father choose his friends.

PART III: Essay Questions (40 points)

1. M.C. hoped James Lewis would want Banina to leave to become a singing star. Since she couldn't go alone, the family would accompany her, thus leaving the mountain.
2. With the failure of his first plan M.C. decides to build a wall in the area he thinks the spoil will fall to afford some type of protection.
3. Banina won't be asked to leave to pursue a recording career and Jones will never leave his ancestors' remains.
4. Jones thinks the heap will continue to slide a little at a time until it reaches the yard, then they can remove it. James Lewis thinks the heap will develop a build up of pressure and it will come crashing down.



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