Literature Guide for Natalia Romanova's

*Once There Was a Tree*

*by Robin M. Huntley*
Summary

Natalia Romanova's Once There Was a Tree tells the story of life after death in nature. Beginning at the end of a great tree's life, the book spotlights the many visitors and inhabitants who benefit from what the former tree's stump and roots have to offer. Beginning and ending with human visitors, the chain of use includes bark beetles, ants, and even a bear! Each visitor to the stump gains something substantial from it and begins to feel ownership of it – though each, unbeknownst to them, ends up sharing it with all of the others. In the end, the stump remains and, though many have utilized it as a resource, it continues to offer itself to the world. So who then does it belong to? All of the visitors feel that it is theirs, yet each of them has taken advantage of a different part of the stump. Without realizing it, the people and creatures who feel they own the stump have actually shared it – allowing the stump to truly belong to everyone and, ultimately, to the earth itself.

In addition to illuminating questions of ownership in nature, the story highlights the beauty of the forest. Illustrator Gennady Spirin's beautiful images echo the woods' magic, and intricate borders and mini-illustrations add to the depth and beauty of the book. The rich and diverse plants and creatures included in Spirin's illustrations help to bring collective ownership in nature to the forefront of readers' minds. The inclusion of numerous species not mentioned in the story supports readers in recognizing the communal nature of natural resources.

Once There Was a Tree can be used with readers of almost any age as the story's essential question is one that can be pondered with as much – or as little – depth as readers are capable of. Additionally, the inclusion of many elements of the natural world allows the story to be used as a tool for inspiring close observation of nature with young readers.

Critical Thinking Questions

The questions listed below are meant to be used to spark discussion, curiosity, and attention to detail amongst readers of Once There Was a Tree. The questions should be asked during a reading of
the book (though some could be considered afterward), and will help readers to make observations, articulate their thoughts, and make connections between the text and its accompanying images. The questions are written with readers ages 6-8 in mind, but can be used with readers of any age (though some complexity should be added for older readers).

- The tree in the story suffers a very dramatic death. What else – besides lightning – might cause trees in the forest to die?
- What clues do the illustrations give to show us that the tree is quite old?
- What might the woodsman do with the wood he collects from the tree?
- What season is it when the tree dies? Use clues from the illustrations to make a good guess.
- In what ways do we see the stump changing over time? How are its visitors involved in these changes?
- Each visitor to the stump thinks of it as their own. What does each visitor (beetle, ant, titmouse, bear, woodsman, man and his dogs) get from the stump? What do they leave behind?
- Who do you think the stump belongs to? Why?
- Why is it, do you think, that each of the visitors thinks that the stump is their own?
- What might the new tree's life cycle be like based on what you know about the old tree's life?

**Mini-Lesson**

Designed for use with readers ages 6-8, this mini-lesson encourages readers to engage in meaningful learning centered around the role of sharing within their natural surroundings. Readers will be asked to identify nearby natural resources, recognize the ways in which they are shared between species, and discuss their own role within this network of sharing. The lesson could be completed in more depth with older readers, but would be difficult for younger readers to access. Necessary materials include writing utensils, paper, and access to a local wild (or semi-wild) outdoor space.
Ownership and Sharing in Nature: An Exploration of Local Natural Resources

In the story Once There Was a Tree, readers learn to see the ways in which a single stump within a forest belongs to everyone, rather than just one person or creature. In this mini-lesson, readers will work to identify a similar small resource within their local landscape and will consider the many things that this resource provides and to whom it gives them. The goal of the lesson is to recognize the shared nature of elements of the local landscape, and to allow readers to begin to understand that elements of nature cannot be separated from one another, but rather exist in conjunction with one another.

1. Begin the lesson by discussing with readers the ways in which the stump in the story was shared. Ask readers if they can think of any other parts of nature that might be shared amongst a variety of creatures. Keep track of readers' ideas by writing them down on a white board, chalk board, or piece of chart paper that can be seen by all. Expected answers from this age group might include logs (though similar to the stump), grass, and sources of water – streams, ponds, rivers, lakes, etc.

2. Inform readers that they'll be using their guesses to guide them on an exploration of a local natural space, and that their job while they're there will be to find something that they can tell is shared by a variety of creatures – maybe something from their list, or perhaps something they hadn't thought of.

3. Prepare readers for their adventure by giving some suggestions of signs of sharing that they might look for. Searching for footprints, claw/peck/teeth marks, fur, feathers, and droppings is a good place to start. Readers will also want to look closely to see if they can see any creatures for themselves – bugs, in particular! Additionally, readers may choose to include things like fungus, moss, and lichen that grow on parts of the landscape but are not creatures.
4. Head outside! Support readers in their discovery by exploring a space that facilitators are already familiar with. Write down readers' observations, and take note of the creatures (and possibly plants or fungi) with whom each of the natural resources considered is shared. Allow for some post-exploration playtime, too!

5. After exploring (this step might happen the next day), make a chart to track the natural resources considered and the ways in which they were shared between living things in the local landscape. A sample chart is below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Shared With...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stream</td>
<td>Frogs, dragonflies, fish, salamanders, turtles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rotting log</td>
<td>Beetles, moss, fungus, ants, snails, slugs, forest plants (adds nutrients to soil)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raspberry bush</td>
<td>Birds, fox, bear, bugs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Add a third column to the chart titled “Used by humans for...” Use this column of the chart to consider (and track) the ways in which each of these things is utilized by humans, as well as the many different living things previously considered. Completion of this step will help readers to see how they themselves are involved in the sharing of nature alongside the many things listed in the chart already.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Used by humans for...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Swimming, fishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking along, finding creatures, hiding inside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. (Optional) Allow readers to further process their experience by creating their own illustration in the style of Gennady Spirin. Readers should focus not on the stump from the story, but on one of the natural resources they saw during their adventure. They should, though, keep in mind Spirin's use of borders and mini-illustrations alongside
larger images. Hang finished works alongside the adventure chart.

Extension Activities

Each of the following activity suggestions are designed to support readers in not only deepening their understanding of the book, but in connecting the information shared within its pages to the world around them. Loosely written so as to allow for adaptability, the activities have been designed with readers of many ages in mind.

Community Resources

Just as nature is filled with shared resources, human communities are rich with both man-made and natural resources that are utilized by a variety of humans for numerous reasons. Replicate the lesson outlined in the “Ownership and Sharing of Nature...” mini-lesson and focus on elements of the local human community that serve as shared resources. This activity will allow readers to see similarities between their own community and the community that is nature.

Identifying the Details

Illustrator Gennady Spirin filled Once There Was a Tree with beautiful, detailed illustrations of a forest landscape. Alongside the stump and its many visitors lie a host of other living things – plants and animals alike. Peruse the pages of the story while focusing solely on these minute details. Then, make a list of what you see and look to field guides to see if you can find out what species Spirin drew inspiration from. While some of the living things included in the illustrations may not be true to their source material (they may not all be real species), it will be possible to find similar species in any comprehensive field guide. This activity will support readers in paying close attention to detail and will allow them to strengthen skills in use of nonfiction texts and species identification.
Life Cycle of a Tree

The story focuses on the post-mortem elements of a tree's life – but what about the pre-mortem elements? Using pre-existing knowledge, life experience, and/or appropriate nonfiction texts, explore the life cycle of a deciduous tree like the one in the story (oak, apple, or walnut work well – choose a species with obvious seeds). Create an image or a series of images that encompasses the tree's entire life, from seed to sprout, then on to growth and life, then to death – and the many things that it provides after death. This activity will help add to readers' understanding of dendrology and the cyclical nature of life.