Virginia Hamilton

The House of Dies Drear

Overview

In this novel, Thomas and his family move into a creepy old house in southwestern Ohio. Thomas learns that the former owner, Dies Drear, was a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Dies Drear was murdered 100 years ago, along with two slaves that he was hiding. Legend has it that their ghosts still haunt the place. When strange things start happening in the house, Thomas and his family are quickly caught up in the mystery.

As they read *The House of Dies Drear*, students will learn about the mystery genre and keep track of instances of suspense and the clues that the characters find. Students will also read another grade-appropriate mystery novel independently, and compare and contrast the two books. Students will write plausible endings for a mystery story, weekly summaries of the assigned reading, a letter from the point of view of a character, and an additional chapter that picks up where the book ends. A series of questions draws upon students' reading and critical thinking skills to generate engaging, focused class discussions.

To prepare for an end-of-lesson test, an Underground Railroad Scavenger Hunt sends students to locations throughout the school that have been designated "safe houses," where they answer questions about *The House of Dies Drear.* Complete instructions and assessment for this activity are provided.

Getting Started

Lesson Objectives

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Track plot developments related to the use of suspense and clues or red herrings
- Write a novel summary that demonstrates an understanding of main ideas and details, development of plot, etc.
- Write a mystery story that incorporates the elements of the genre as taught in this lesson
- Successfully complete an assessment that provides evidence of reading comprehension and the ability to recall important details and identify character development

Grade Level Indicators

To meet the above lesson objectives, students will:

A Use the text to demonstrate reading comprehension strategies, including the ability to make predictions, compare and contrast, recall and summarize important ideas and supporting details, point out any gaps or contradictions, and draw conclusions

B Use criteria to choose independent reading materials (e.g. personal interest, knowledge of authors and genres, or recommendations from others)

C Read books independently for a variety of purposes (e.g. for enjoyment, for literary experience, to gain information, or to perform a task)

D Identify and explain the writer's technique in describing characters, characters' interactions and conflicts, and how these interactions and conflicts affect the plot

E Identify and analyze the importance of setting (time, place, and situation) in relation to other literary elements of the text (plot, character development, etc.)

H Use available technology to compose text

I Publish writing for display or for sharing with others

K Produce informal writings (e.g. journals, notes, and poems) for various purposes

M Compare and contrast important details about a topic using different sources of information, including books, magazines, newspapers, and online resources

Reading Strategies

Summarizing, Activating Prior Knowledge, Inferring, Determining Importance in a Text

Materials Needed

- Student copies of *The House of Dies Drear*
- Copies of the Elements of Mystery graphic organizer (two copies per student)
- Student copies of the Novel Glossary (found on page 191 of this Instructor's Guide)
- Other grade-appropriate mystery novels (one per student)

Additional Resources

- *(optional)* Access to computers with word processing and printing capability
- *(optional)* Internet access
- *(optional)* The *Ohio Reading Road Trip* Instructional DVD/videocassette, television monitor, DVD player or VCR
- *(optional)* Copy of *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* by Deborah Hopkinson (Random House, 1995, ISBN# 0679874720)
- *(optional)* Copy of *The House of Dies Drear* DVD or VHS cassette

For more information on Virginia Hamilton, visit http://www.ohioreadingroadtrip.org/hamilton.html

Time Required: 20 class periods or more

Though a pacing guide is included here, this lesson is best organized around four weeks of instruction that you can tailor to the needs of your students. The amount of homework that you assign will dictate your daily classroom plans. Each week, students will read one-third of *The House of Dies Drear*, write a summary of the assigned reading, answer discussion questions, and update their notes on suspense and clues to reflect the week's reading. Additional time can be devoted to silent reading of the Hamilton book or the second mystery book, or time can be spent on the students' own mystery stories. Several optional extension activities are included as well. The final week of this instruction will revolve around writing and reading activities, a scavenger hunt to prepare the students for assessment, and the assessment itself.

Activity	Pacing
Week One	
Genre Concepts/Complete Graphic Organizer	45 minutes
Learn Vocabulary Words for Chapters 1–7	25 minutes
Class Visit to Library/Begin Reading	45 minutes
Write Summary of Chapters 1–7	20 minutes
Discussion	45 minutes
Readers' Notes/ Sustained Silent Reading (SSR)	45 minutes
Week Two	
Learn Vocabulary Words for Chapters 8–13	25 minutes
Time for Reading	20 minutes
Write Summary of Chapters 8–13	25 minutes
Discussion	45 minutes
Readers' Notes	20 minutes
Writing Activity: Letter to Grandma Jeffers	45 minutes
"Follow the Drinking Gourd" Activity or SSR	45 minutes

Activity	Pacing
Week Three	
Learn Vocabulary Words for Chapters 14–19	25 minutes
Time for Reading	20 minutes
Write Summary of Chapters 14–19	25 minutes
Discussion	45 minutes
Readers' Notes	20 minutes
Writing Activity: Write a New Chapter	45 minutes
Extension Activity: Research or SSR	45 minutes
Week Four	
Mystery Book Project Work **or** "Sweet Clara" Activity	45 minutes
Underground Railroad Scavenger Hunt	45 minutes
Assessment	45 minutes
Share Mystery Book Project	45 minutes
Share Mystery Book Project **or** Movie Activity	45 minutes

Prepare to Learn

Elements of a Mystery

You can prepare students to read *The House of Dies Drear* by presenting important mystery genre concepts using the worksheet included in this lesson. Students will find that—as in other kinds of narratives—characters, setting, plot/problem, and conclusion/solution are found in the mystery genre. They will also need to understand the terms *clue*, *red herring*, and *suspense*.

Provide each student with a copy of the novel and a copy of the Elements of a Mystery worksheet found at the end of this lesson.

- As a class, fill in the title and author from the front cover and read the summary on the back of the novel. This summary will provide basic information about the characters and settings, and predictions about the plot.
- Have students complete the Short Answer section of the worksheet.
- Ask students to use this information to complete the final section of the worksheet.

Readers' Notes

Discuss what is meant by a *clue* (a fact or object that helps to solve a mystery or problem), a *red herring* (a clue meant to throw the reader off track) and *suspense* (the feeling that something violent or frightening is about to happen). Tell students that, as they read, they should try to determine whether the clues are real hints that will help the characters solve the mystery or whether the clues are red herrings. They will do this by keeping notes on these topics as they read.

Mystery Book Project

This activity will proceed concurrently with the reading of *The House of Dies Drear*. It affords students the opportunity to independently choose and read a mystery that they will discuss with their peers at the end of this lesson. Reading a second mystery while they read the Hamilton book will enable them to compare and contrast such elements as plot, character development, use of suspense, clues/red herrings, etc. This will help them arrive at a better understanding of the mystery genre.

Provide opportunities for students to select their own mystery book by scheduling a class visit to your school's library or your local public library. Students should look for books that are at least 100 pages long. Be sure to check their selections for age- and grade-level appropriateness. Help students divide their books into four roughly equal sections. Have students find the page on which each section should end, locate the nearest chapter or section break, and mark it with a self-stick note. Students should read one section each week. At the end of this lesson, students will take part in the Mystery Book Project. The project begins with individual writing work and then becomes a group reading activity that involves making predictions.

As an incentive for taking notes on suspense and clues/red herrings, students should share their findings in small groups. These groups will then report to the class. You may wish to keep track of the number of clues each group finds to encourage students to be thorough in their search for these important mystery elements.

Differentiated Learning: Additional Instruction

If students are not fully grasping the elements of a mystery, it might be helpful to read a few selections from "Two-Minute Mysteries" by Donald J. Sobol (Scott Foresman, 1991, ISBN# 0590447874). Have them identify the elements as a class, using an overhead of the worksheet.

Oral Reading

For variety, use a combination of oral and silent reading. When reading orally, try the "Popcorn" approach. Have a student begin reading. When the student wants to stop, he or she says, "Popcorn" and the name of another student to continue the reading. Students must read at least three sentences before calling "Popcorn." This encourages all students to stay on task, but never forces those who aren't comfortable reading aloud to read for a long time. Those who love to read aloud can read as much as they like, setting a good example for the others. Based on the needs and interests of your students, determine how much oral reading will occur. In assigning silent reading, be sure to give students daily goals so that all students are "on the same page" for discussions, writing assignments, etc.

Chapters 1–7

Write Now!

In order to gauge reading comprehension and the ability to determine important events in the plot, ask each student to write a two-paragraph summary of Chapters 1–7. You may want to require them to use vocabulary words from this section of the reading in their summaries. Students should refer to their summaries as the class discusses the following questions.

Discussion Questions

- What information does Thomas gather about his new home before he arrives? How might this information have influenced his feelings about the house?
- From whose point of view is the story told? *(Answer: third-person limited omniscient.)* How would it be different if it were told from the point of view of a character in the story?
- Who is Mr. Pluto? Why is Thomas so upset that Mr. Pluto arranged all of their furniture?
- Thomas thinks Pluto's arranging the furniture is a warning that the family should leave. How does he come to this conclusion? Why do *you* think Pluto arranged the furniture?
- Thomas thinks Mac Darrow and Pesty are strange. Look at Chapter 4 to find examples of their words, actions, and appearances. Compare and contrast these characters with people you know. Do you agree with Thomas?
- Describe Thomas's experience in the tunnel below the house. Would you have gone in the tunnel? Why or why not?
- How do you explain the "ahhh, ahhh" sound that Thomas hears in the tunnel?
- In Chapter 7, Thomas and Mr. Small make inferences, or informed guesses, about Pluto after talking with him about his black horse. What are those inferences? On what details are they based? Do you agree with their inferences?
- Based on what you've read so far in this novel, would you want to live in the house of Dies Drear? Explain.

Chapters 1–7

brackish
calamity
chicory
conceive
craven
desolation
eccentric
fatigue
fertile
gerfalcon
lame
maneuver
mansard roof
menacing
opaque
percolate
quatrefoil
reluctant
sinister
spry

Definitions for these words can be found in the Novel Glossary on page 191.

The Ohio Reading Road Trip Instructional DVD/videocassette and website contain more information on the Underground Railroad and The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati.

For a review of point of view, turn to the Relevant Literary Terms section on page 185.

Readers' Notes

Students should update their suspense and clues notes before the next reading assignment. Check to see that they have included the following notes.

- Suspense: page 37: the twins share an unexplainable tantrum when Thomas presses a mysterious button; page 39: Thomas falls down because he sees something strange coming toward him; page 50: Thomas hears the sound in the tunnel; page 68: Thomas sees the fire and enormous head come out of the platform
- Clues/Red Herrings: page 1: Thomas's nightmare on the way to Ohio; page 32: Pluto's arranging the family's possessions in a certain way; page 81: the poem chanted by Pluto about Dies Drear

Chapters 8–13

Write Now!

In order to gauge reading comprehension and the ability to determine important events in the plot, ask each student to write a two-paragraph summary of Chapters 8–13. You may want to require them to use vocabulary words from this section of the reading in their summaries. Students should refer to their summaries during the class discussion prompted by the following questions.

Discussion Questions

- How does Mr. Small explain the odd behavior and appearance of Mr. Pluto to his family? What details about Mr. Pluto does he use to make these inferences? Do you think Mr. Small is correct? Explain.
- Thomas thinks there is something wrong with the size of the kitchen. What knowledge does he use to make this inference?
- How does Mr. Small explain the "ahhh" sound Thomas keeps hearing? Explain his reasons for making this inference.
- Compare and contrast Mac Darrow with the other Darrows.
- What impact does the church service have on Thomas? Explain.
- What are some reasons Mr. Darrow moved his family to this small town in Ohio?
- Why do Thomas and his father search the tunnel for Mr. Pluto?
- What do you think Mr. Pluto is up to?
- What do you think the triangles mean?
- Do you think that the house is really haunted? Explain.

Write Now!

Have students write a friendly letter to Grandma Jeffers from Thomas telling about his new home in Ohio. You may want to have them revise their letters and type them for classroom display.

Readers' Notes

Students should update their suspense and clues notes before the next reading assignment. Check to see that they have identified the following details.

Chapters 8–13

bellows
confide
hearth
prejudiced
runagate
specter
standoffish
stealthily
tulle
vestibule

Definitions for these words can be found in the Novel Glossary on page 191.

- Suspense: page 93: the "darkness" that "moves" in the house while the Smalls sleep; page 96: Thomas finds his father in the hallway, trying to figure out what the triangles mean; page 118: the sound in the vestibule, then Pluto and Pesty entering the church; page 154: Thomas and Mr. Small encounter Pluto near the mouth of the cave and Pluto runs away from them, then seems to disappear; page 161: Mr. Small pulls a rope in the cave and the wall slides away
- Clues/Red Herrings: page 83: Pluto's leather gloves; page 97: the three triangles near the doors of the Smalls' bedrooms; page 134: the fourth triangle in Mr. Small's office door; page 141: Mr. Carr telling Mr. Small that the Darrows did not get along with Pluto; page 149: the mess in the Smalls' kitchen

Chapters 14–19

Write Now!

Ask each student to write a two-paragraph summary of Chapters 14–19. Again, you may want to require them to use vocabulary words from this section of the reading in their summaries. Students should refer to their summaries during the class discussion prompted by the following questions.

Discussion Questions

- Why was River Swift Darrow afraid of the house of Dies Drear?
- What "trick" has Mr. Pluto's son been playing on the Small family? Why has he done so?
- Look back through the novel for scenes with Mr. Pluto. Make inferences about which times "Mr. Pluto" was actually Pluto's son Mayhew in disguise.
- What do the Smalls and Mayhew Skinner do to the Darrow family? Why do they feel they need to take this action?
- How is Mr. Pluto a part of the legend of the three slaves?
- What is Mr. Small going to do with the treasure? What do you think of this plan?
- Why didn't Thomas look in the trunk? What would you have done? What do you think is in the trunk?

Write Now!

Ask students what they think will happen next. Ask each of them to write a chapter that picks up where the book leaves off. Have students share their chapters in small groups. Encourage them to explain what they wrote. Then ask each group to select one chapter to be shared with the class.

Readers' Notes

Students should update their suspense notes before the next reading assignment. (They will likely not find clues at this point in the reading.) Check to see that they have identified the following details.

An extension activity that connects the novel to the folk song "Follow the Drinking Gourd" can be found at http://www.ohioreadingroadtrip.org/hamilton.html

Chapters 14–19

belittle
fanatical
fragmentary
gossamer
phantasm
shroud
translucent
withering
zeal

Definitions for these words can be found in the Novel Glossary on page 191.

At the end of Chapter 14, Pluto quotes the famous Paul Laurence Dunbar poem, "We Wear the Mask." Dunbar, another Ohio writer from the southwestern part of the state, is the subject of a lesson in the poetry unit of this Instructor's Guide. The complete text of the poem appears there.

- Suspense: page 174: Thomas falls down because he sees something extremely frightening; Chapter 16 is suspenseful because it contains the plans for tricking the Darrows

Underground Railroad Scavenger Hunt Activity

This activity is a review for a final assessment for the lesson on *The House of Dies Drear.*

Before Class:

1. Make a list of 12 Safe Passage Questions. These might be taken from the discussion questions in this lesson or the end-of-lesson test, or you might write your own questions based on class discussions or student summaries.
2. Write each of the 12 Safe Passage Questions (along with the correct answer) on its own index card.
3. Copy the Clue Cards page found at the end of this lesson. You will need one set of Clue Cards for each group of five or six students in your class. Cut apart the Clue Cards.
4. Make Fate Cards to hand out to disruptive or noisy students. You can use these examples or make your own. Printable cards are available on the ORRT website.
   - You've been found by slave hunters who return you to your owner.
   - You have to hide in the woods for a week because slave hunters are nearby.
   - You take the wrong path and get lost in the cornfields.
5. Locate 12 staff members in the building who are willing to be conductors on the Underground Railroad. Provide each of them with one of the Safe Passage Question index cards. Also give them all the copies of one clue to give to students after they correctly answer the Safe Passage Question. (For example, one staff member receives all of the "hollow tree" clue cards. All students who answer the question correctly go on to the classroom that has a symbol of a hollow tree on its door.)
6. Use the designs on the Clue Cards to make signs for the 12 staff members' rooms. Post a different sign outside each door.

In Class:

1. Divide the class into groups of 5–6 students.
2. Explain that students will try to make their way to "freedom" by finding safe houses on the Underground Railroad. You will give them one clue to start. To receive additional clues, they must answer a question correctly at each of the 12 houses along the "Underground Railroad."
3. Give each student an identity card that explains his or her situation as a slave. You can use these examples or make your own. Printable cards are available on the ORRT website.
   - Your name is Mary. Your teenage son ran away two weeks ago and you are fleeing north to try to find him.

Ideas for research projects connected to Hamilton's novel can be found at http://www.ohioreadingroadtrip.org/hamilton.html

Tell students that they are considered "hidden" as long as they are completely quiet, but if they are talkative or disruptive, they will receive a Fate Card. Give each group of students their first clue as they leave the classroom.

As they return, you may want to give each of them a "mystery" treat and a review sheet that covers all the questions on the scavenger hunt. This will be helpful for students who return to the classroom having answered a question incorrectly at a "safe house." They should complete this review sheet, using their books if necessary, as they wait for the other students to return.

- Your name is Ambrose. You and your brother ran away at the same time and you are supposed to meet him near a certain creek in central Ohio. You have been waiting for him for three weeks.
- Your name is Stella. You are traveling with your husband. Because he is ill he must rest often, and you have been moving slowly.
- Your name is John. You are fleeing north, and in four months your children plan to escape. You plan to meet them before winter.
- Your name is Christopher. You have escaped slavery, but you put yourself in danger to help other slaves make their way to freedom.
- Your name is Helen. You just ran away two days ago, but you have already heard that your mother, who escaped six months ago, is waiting for you nearby. You will walk to freedom together.

Mystery Book Project

This project is the culminating activity in the independent reading project that accompanies this lesson. Students need to finish their independent reading before beginning this activity, which also includes writing and working in small groups with other students.

1. Give each student another copy of the "Elements of a Mystery Story" worksheet used to introduce *The House of Dies Drear.* Have them complete it for the mystery novel they have read independently. This will help them with the writing activity that follows, and it will also provide an opportunity for assessment.
2. Have each student write a 5–6 paragraph summary of the novel they read, as well as three different endings. One ending should be the actual ending of the book, paraphrased in the student's own words. The other two endings should be of the student's invention. Tell students to strive for the same (or better) quality and believability in their endings as in the original book. This is also a good opportunity for them to model narrative voice by emulating the book's voice. Each ending should be typed and printed on a separate sheet of paper. Students should not identify which ending is the real one.
3. Divide the class into groups of three or four students. Have each student take turns reading his or her own summary and the three "endings" to his or her group. Listeners should remain quiet, writing a paragraph that names the ending they believe is real and why. Each student in the group should share their ideas aloud with the others. Then the reader should reveal the real ending.

Assessment

A test that measures students' reading comprehension can be found on the following pages.

Visit http://www.ohioreadingroadtrip.org/hamilton.html for instruction and discussion questions for the film adaptation of the novel.

An activity that incorporates the children's book "Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt," a fictional tale of a girl who uses patterns on quilts to lead slaves to freedom, can be found at http://www.ohioreadingroadtrip.org/hamilton.html

Answers for the matching portion of the test:

1. c	2. h	3. i	4. g
5. b	6. a	7. d	8. f

Answers for the character identification portion of the test:

1. Mayhew Skinner
2. Pesty
3. Pluto
4. Mac Darrow
5. Thomas

Name _____ **Date** _____

THE ELEMENTS OF A MYSTERY

TITLE OF BOOK _____

AUTHOR _____

Short Answer: Write the name of one main character and one minor character and a short description of each. Then describe the setting and conflict. Use complete sentences.

Main Character: _____

_____

_____

Minor Character: _____

_____

_____

Setting: _____

_____

_____

Conflict: _____

_____

_____

General Predictions about Plot

Use your knowledge of the mystery genre and what you have learned from reading the book jacket or back cover to write a few sentences about what may happen in the story.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Name _____ Date _____

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The House of Dies Drear

Directions: Match the description on the left with the term on the right that fits best.

1. ___ Pluto's real name
2. ___ the protagonist of the story
3. ___ Mr. Small's profession
4. ___ Thomas's hobby
5. ___ the antagonist of the story
6. ___ shape the triangles created
7. ___ nickname for the Miami Valley
8. ___ Mr. Pluto's nickname for Pesty

a. Greek cross
b. the Darrow family
c. Henry Skinner
d. the Sinus Valley
e. the North Star
f. Little Miss Bee
g. carving wood
h. Thomas Small
i. history professor
j. Pluto
k. Suzie Q
l. mechanic

Directions: Answer each question in a complete sentence.

1. Who is the author of this book? _____
2. What is the genre of this book? _____
3. What is the major conflict of this story? _____

_____

4. Describe what Pesty is doing the first time Thomas sees her.

_____

_____

5. What does the word “Pluto” mean and why does this character call himself “Pluto”?

_____

_____

Directions: Read the following passages. If the passage is dialogue, identify which character is speaking. If the passage is not dialogue, identify which character is being described.

1. “I did not want my father to be taken advantage of by the Darrows so I pretended to be him for a while.”

_____

2. “I can sing sweeter than anyone Thomas has ever heard and I take care of things for Mr. Pluto.”

_____

3. “I couldn’t have told you what it was I hunted, except it was inside of me. And I knew that house would bring it out of me to show it to me.”

_____

4. His family has been searching for the treasure of Dies Drear for years. He tries to scare off anyone who tries to move into Dies Drear’s house.

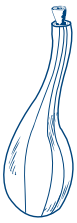
_____

5. He had a dream about Mr. Pluto on the way to his new house and knew he wasn’t going to like him because he was the devil.

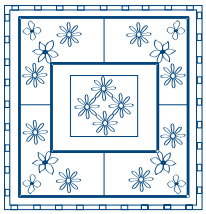
_____

Directions: On a separate sheet of paper, answer each of the following questions in complete paragraphs.

1. Describe Thomas’s relationship with Mr. Pluto and how it changed throughout the novel. Describe some of Mr. Pluto and Thomas’s encounters. How does Thomas feel about him at the end of the story?
2. Explain the mystery of Dies Drear. What happened? What was the treasure and how did it get there? Who did Dies Drear leave it to? What did Mr. Small decide to do with it?
3. Was there a hero in this story? If so, name the hero.



Let the stars that form a drinking gourd guide you to the north.



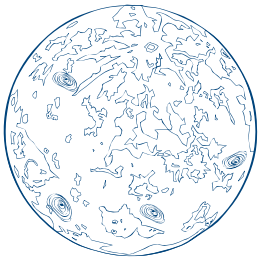
Go to the house with a quilt draped over the porch railing.

Make a left at the hollow tree.

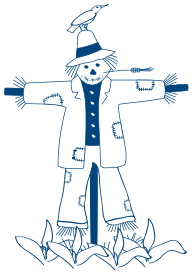
Wait in the cornfield. Someone will meet you there.

Cross the bridge over a shallow creek.

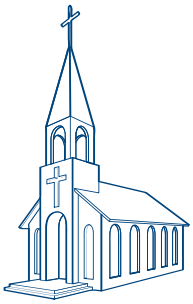
You know you are halfway there when you see this fence.



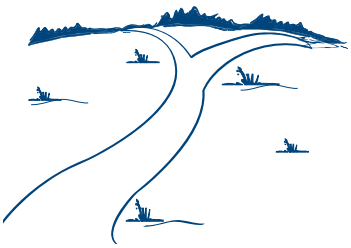
Let the moon guide you on your way.



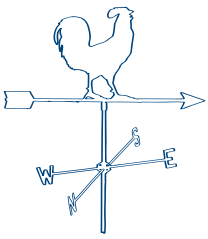
Make a right at the scarecrow.



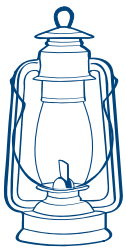
Rest in the field behind the church.



Take the left-hand path at the fork in the road.



When you see this weathervane, you know you are almost there.



You made it to the house with the lantern. You are free!