

The Bean Trees Study Questions

As you read the story, make note of any words or expressions you're not familiar with, such as the slang terms and regional idioms that occur in both the narration and the dialogue.

Chapter 1: The One to Get Away

1. What connotations does the title of Chapter 1 have?
2. Describe the personality and character of Taylor, the narrator. What things does she say and do that reveal these qualities? What qualities make her “escape” possible?
3. In what ways is Taylor’s journey a very American one, and in what ways is it different from the traditional American migration?
4. How does Taylor’s mother influence her? What role does she play in the story?
5. What influence does the environment Taylor has grown up in have on her? Discuss Taylor’s feelings about Newt Hardbine and Jolene Shanks. How do these feelings and her observations about them affect her?
6. What symbolic meaning do you think the story about the exploding tire might have? How is it significant in terms of understanding Taylor’s character?
7. Find the references to fish in Chapter 1. What symbolic meaning do you think they have? Can you think of anything else in the story so far that might have symbolic significance?
8. Describe the tone and style of Taylor’s narrative voice. Find a few examples of this characteristic style in the first two chapters.

Chapter 2: New Year’s Pig

1. What do you think is the significance of the title of this chapter?
2. What differences are there between the narration of Chapter 1 and that of Chapter 2?
3. Describe Lou Ann’s personality and character. What things does she say and do that reveal these qualities? In what ways is she similar to Taylor, and in what ways is she different? How does the last sentence of Chapter 2 illustrate the differences in their characters?
4. Describe Angel and his relationship with Lou Ann. Why do you think he decides to leave her? What does her reaction to his leaving show about their relationship?
5. **Review Question:** In what ways do the first two chapters represent a feminist perspective? What feminist concerns are raised in these two chapters?
6. **Review Question:** What role do religious ideas and religious imagery have in the first two chapters? Find examples of the way Christianity is presented in the narration.

Chapter 3: Jesus Is Lord Used Tires

1. Why do you think the narrative at the beginning of the chapter is structured in the form of a flashback?

2. What do you think is the significance of the title of this chapter? How is it ironic that Taylor finds help at a tire shop? What is the significance of the wall of tires at the shop? What do you think the flowers growing out of tires and the body of an old car are intended to symbolize?
3. Discuss Taylor's reaction to Tucson. Keep in mind Taylor's thoughts about the "visitor from another planet" T-shirt worn by the man she encounters.
4. Describe Mattie. In what ways is she similar to Taylor's mother?
5. What details of this chapter might be instances of foreshadowing?
6. In what way is Taylor's "adoption" of Turtle appropriate and thematically significant?
7. What might the purple bean vines from China symbolize?

Chapter 4: Tug Fork Water

1. Describe Lou Ann's relationship with her mother and grandmother, and their relationship with each other. What is the prevailing mood of the chapter, and what details convey this mood? How does this situation seem to affect Lou Ann? What details of the narration convey her attitude toward them?
2. What is implied by the description of Lou Ann's reaction to being baptized? What tone is conveyed by the narrator's presentation of Mama and Granny Logan's religious pronouncements?
3. How might Bobby Bingo's advice ("whatever you want the most, it's going to be the worst thing for you") relate to Lou Ann?
4. How does Lou Ann's dead father continue to influence the members of Lou Ann's family? What details in the chapter convey this continuing influence?
5. How is Lou Ann's attitude toward Angel changing? Why do you think she decides to pretend that they are still living together?
6. What do you think is the symbolic significance of the Tug Fork water? What does Angel's pouring it down the drain symbolize?
7. **Review Question:** Find a few examples of the use of slang expressions (including regional expressions), idioms, and figurative language in the first four chapters and interpret their meaning.

Chapter 5: Harmonious Space

1. Discuss the "Burger Derby incident" at the beginning of the chapter. How is it consistent with Taylor's established personality? What is the tone of the narration of the incident? In what way might it be seen as a kind of social commentary?
2. Discuss Taylor's interview with the "Bean Curd kids." Describe their personalities and behavior, especially Fei's. What bothers Taylor about her, and what is the tone of the narration during this encounter? Why do you think the passage ends with Taylor's comment about Cherokee skipping a generation?
3. What factors make Lou Ann and Taylor a good match for each other?
4. What signs are there in the chapter that Turtle's psychological condition is not improving? What connection does Lou Ann's cat, Snowboots, have with Turtle?

Chapter 6: Valentine's Day

1. What is ironic about the job that Taylor takes? How is it an appropriate development in terms of the themes and messages of the novel? How does Mattie respond to Taylor's revelation, and what effect does it seem to have on their relationship?
2. What further foreshadowing is there in this chapter regarding the Spanish-speaking people living with Mattie?
3. Describe Lou Ann's mental state and attitude toward life. How does the expression "hogs go deaf at harvest time" apply to her? How is she different from Taylor, and what doesn't Taylor like about their current situation? What do Lou Ann's attitude toward drinking and her story about going to see the meteor shower show about her and her relationship with Angel?
4. Discuss the new insights this chapter gives us into Taylor's feelings about men.
5. Discuss how both the motto "live free or bust" and the "man in the maze" Indian symbol apply to the novel so far.

Chapter 7: How They Eat in Heaven

1. What are the narrative functions of the opening paragraph of the chapter?
2. What signs are there in this chapter that Turtle is beginning to recover? What is symbolically significant about the beans she buries in the garden? Why do you think she is so interested in vegetables?
3. Describe Estevan based on his words and actions in this chapter. Describe Esperanza. What is her state of mind, and what clues are there in the chapter about the causes of it? What is ironic about her name?
4. What foreshadowing is there in the chapter regarding Estevan and Taylor?
5. In what sense does "Turtle [have] to take practically everything on faith," as Taylor puts it? How does this idea relate to the themes of the novel?
6. One major motif in the novel is the arrogance of those who have power (whites, men, powerful nations, etc.) and the harmful effects of their abuse of that power. How does this relate to Lou Ann, Estevan and Esperanza, and Virgie Mae in this chapter? (Consider, for example, Lou Ann's obsession with her appearance.)
7. Discuss the story Estevan tells at the end of the chapter. How does it relate to the chapter and the story as a whole?

Chapter 8: The Miracle of Dog Doo Park

1. Why is it "ridiculous" that Taylor's mom is getting married? Consider the attitudes about men, her mother, and Pittman County that Taylor has expressed throughout the novel. Why do you think her mother has made this decision (or allowed it to happen), and what thematic significance does this event have?
2. How is the wording of the title of this chapter ironic? What is the "miracle of Dog Doo Park," and how is it symbolically significant?

3. What insight does Estevan have about the way Americans think? What reason might there be for this way of thinking? How does this issue relate to the themes of the book?
4. What other parallels are there in the book to Mattie's unofficial asylum? What theme(s) is this motif of refuge used to express and develop?
5. What do you think the bird that has made her nest in the cactus symbolizes? What do Turtle's "hidden scars" (her broken bones) symbolize? How is the name "April" significant?
6. **Review Question:** Find a few examples of the use of slang expressions (including regional expressions), idioms, and figurative language in Chapters 5-8 and interpret their meaning.

Chapter 9: Ismene

1. What theme(s) in the novel do Taylor's stories about Scotty and "nutters" relate to?
2. During her conversation with Estevan, Taylor thinks, "This man [is] way beyond me." What does she mean by this, and what theme(s) in the novel do this thought and Taylor's subsequent thoughts help develop? What do you think Estevan means when he says, "don't be so sure until you have all the facts," and what theme does this relate to? What does Taylor mean when she says that "a certain kind of horror is beyond tears"?
3. In what way has Taylor's life been "running along on dumb luck," and what is the significance of the fact that she "[has]n't even noticed"?
4. What painful irony is Ismene's upbringing likely to lead to—the disturbing side of the comforting fact that her life is continuing? Consider the significance of her name. (Ismene is a character in ancient Greek literature. If you don't know who she is, look her up on Wikipedia.)

Chapter 10: The Bean Trees

1. What do you think the birds in Roosevelt Park symbolize? What is the thematic significance of the "flower trees" transformation into "bean trees"? How is the cross in Mattie's living room thematically significant?
2. What theme(s) does the revelation about Edna's blindness relate to? How are Edna and Virgie Mae an example of important theme(s) in the novel? Given Virgie Mae's exchange with Estevan at dinner in Chapter 7, what is ironic about this revelation?
3. How is Esperanza's name thematically significant? How might Taylor's name be appropriate for her personality and role in the novel?
4. What is the symbolic and thematic significance of "Fanny Heaven"? What advice does Taylor give Lou Ann about dealing with it, and why—what does she mean when she says, "Otherwise it kind of weasels its way into your head whether you like it or not"? What broader theme does this advice reflect?

Chapter 11: Dream Angels

1. What might the chiles and their effect on the factory workers symbolize?
2. What is the psychological significance of Lou Ann's dream and her story about the cigar box?
3. What does Taylor mean when she says, "If the truth was a snake it would have bitten me long ago"?

4. What signs are there in these two chapters that Lou Ann is gaining self-confidence? Do you think she will choose to get back together with Angel? What message emerges from the interplay between Taylor's growing awareness of the tragedies in the world and Lou Ann's constant anxiety?

Chapter 12: Into the Terrible Night

1. What do you think the rain and the "clean" scent associated with it symbolize? What do you think the desert toads symbolize?

2. What does Taylor mean when she says of Turtle, "All these months we had spent together were gone for her"? What different meanings might the title of the chapter have for Turtle and for Taylor? What do you think the bird symbolizes?

Chapter 13: Night-Blooming Cereus

1. What symbolic significance might Taylor's difficulty breathing have? What do you think she means when she says that "depression is like cancer"?

2. How do you feel about the state government's position on the issue of Turtle's guardianship? Discuss your reasons for your opinion.

3. What insight does being a parent give Taylor into the popularity of fortune tellers? What theme(s) does Mattie's comment that "nobody can protect a child from the world" relate to?

4. Given Taylor's comment about the picture of the Aztec man carrying the unconscious woman, why is the idea that men are strong and women are weak so prevalent, and what broader theme does this issue relate to?

5. What do you think the "night-blooming cereus" symbolizes? What is the thematic significance of the fact that "after you pluck them, they lose their fragrance"?

6. What does Taylor mean when she says, "It's a sad day for us all if I'm being a hero here," and what ideas about human nature does this relate to? What is the thematic significance of the run-over blackbird?

Chapter 14: Guardian Saints

1. What apparent foreshadowing regarding Esperanza and Turtle occurs in this chapter?

2. What is the symbolic significance of the alligator and the quetzal? What theme about history is expressed by the image of Christopher Columbus that Taylor refers to? What do you think is the psychological significance of the use of the term "illegals" to refer to those who come to the United States without official government approval? What does Estevan mean when he says that the palindrome about the Panama Canal is "a typical gringo way of looking at that endeavor"?

3. How is the Cherokee Nation an appropriate place for Estevan and Esperanza to make a new life, in both practical and symbolic terms?

Chapter 15: Lake o' the Cherokees

1. What is the symbolic significance of Lake Oologah?

2. What signs of change occur in Esperanza, and what do you think are the reasons for this change? What is the significance of their names—why does Taylor refuse to call them "Steven" and "Hope"?

3. According to Taylor, what makes the things people get upset about “seem like some elaborate adult invention,” and why do you think this happens?

Chapter 16: Soundness of Mind and Freedom of Will

1. What does the title refer to, and what connection do you think it has to the story?

2. What happens to Esperanza in the process of helping Taylor adopt Turtle? Why do you think she has this reaction?

Chapter 17: Rhizobia

Based on your understanding of the novel’s deeper aspects such as theme, symbolism, style, and character development, create 4-6 of your own study questions for this chapter.

Chapter 17: Rhizobia

1. What does Estevan mean when he says, “in a world as wrong as this one, all we can do is to make things as right as we can”? What does Taylor mean when she says, “all four of us had buried someone we loved in Oklahoma”?
2. What psychological significance do 1-800-THE-LORD and the Cherokee Nation have for Taylor in the novel? What theme about faith do these symbols help express?
3. What is revealed about the nature of rhizobia that is thematically significant in the story, and why?
4. What does Lou Ann mean when she says, “everything you ever get is really just on loan”?
5. What symbolic meaning does vegetable soup have in the context of the novel’s plot and themes?