

Before You Read

A Crush

Connect to the Short Story

Think about someone your age whom you wish you knew better. How could you let this person know that you want to get to know him or her?

List List ways you might quietly let someone know you'd like to get to know him or her better.

Build Background

W. Atlee Burpee & Co. is a mail-order seed company. A character in this story grows the following flowers from Burpee seeds.

- Zinnias have hairy stems and come in a variety of colors.
- Cornflowers have blue petals.
- Nasturtiums may be red, yellow, or orange.
- Marigolds may have yellow, orange, or red petals.
- Asters may be white, pink, yellow, purple, or blue.
- Four-o'clocks come in shades of white, yellow, pink, and red. Their name describes when their petals open: late afternoon.

Vocabulary

excess (ek'ses) *adj.* more than usual or necessary (p. 421). *After cleaning her closet, Tabitha donated her excess clothes to charity.*

speculation (spek'yə lā'shən) *n.* the act of forming an opinion or conclusion based on guesswork (p. 422). *Whether Mona or Trey would win the election for class president caused speculation among the students.*

improbable (im prob'ə bəl) *adj.* not likely (p. 423). *If you leave now, it seems improbable that you'll miss the bus.*

illuminated (i lōō'mə nāt id) *adj.* lit up (p. 424). *Illuminated by lights, the streets attracted late-night shoppers.*

discreetly (dis krēt'lē) *adv.* in a manner showing good judgment (p. 428). *Harry realized that he had walked in on a private discussion, so he discreetly walked away.*

Meet Cynthia Rylant

"I get a lot of personal gratification thinking of those people who don't get any attention in the world and making them really valuable in my fiction—making them absolutely shine with their beauty."

—Cynthia Rylant

A Difficult Childhood Cynthia Rylant grew up in West Virginia in a home without electricity or running water. In her early writings, she drew on this experience to describe ordinary characters in difficult situations.

Literary Works Rylant is the author of picture books, poetry, short stories, and young adult novels, including *Missing May*, which won a Newbery Medal. "A Crush" was first published in 1990.

Cynthia Rylant was born in 1954.



Literature Online

Author Search For more about Cynthia Rylant, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL29763u3.

Set Purposes for Reading

BQ BIG Question

As you read, ask yourself, how can kindness and affection help to make a person's life better?

Literary Element Symbol

A **symbol** is an object, a person, a place, or an experience that represents something else and means more than what it is. For example, a dove is a symbol of peace. A mountain may be a symbol of strength.

Authors use symbols to create deeper meaning and to emphasize themes in their works. Discovering the meaning of a symbol will help you gain a better understanding of a selection.

As you read "A Crush," look for words, images, and actions that may represent something else. Ask yourself, what do these things symbolize, and why are they important in this story?

Reading Strategy Draw Conclusions About Characters

When you **draw conclusions** as you read, you use pieces of information to make a general statement about characters, events, and ideas. You figure out more than what the author states directly.

Drawing conclusions about characters will help you understand the main idea or essential message of what you read. When you draw conclusions about characters, you can better understand why characters say and do certain things.

To draw conclusions about characters, look for details about the characters. Use these details to make general statements about the characters. As you read "A Crush," use the chart below to organize details about the characters. Then draw conclusions about the characters, their thoughts, and their actions.

Character Name	Details About the Character	What I Already Know	Conclusions I Can Draw About the Character

Learning Objectives

For pages 419–432

In studying this text, you will focus on the following objectives:

Literary Study: Analyzing symbols.

Reading: Drawing conclusions about characters.

TRY IT

Draw Conclusions Imagine that you saw a classmate pick up someone's papers from the floor, open the door for the teacher, and sit at lunch with a new student who has not yet made friends at school. What conclusion might you draw about this classmate?

A Crush

Cynthia Rylant



When the windows of Stan's Hardware started filling up with flowers, everyone in town knew something had happened. **Excess** flowers usually mean death, but since these were all real flowers bearing the aroma of nature instead of floral preservative,¹ and since they stood bunched in clear mason jars instead of impaled on styrofoam crosses, everyone knew nobody had died. So they all figured somebody had a crush and kept quiet.

¹ **Floral preservative** is a chemical that helps cut flowers stay fresh looking.

Vocabulary

excess (ek'ses) *adj.* more than usual or necessary

Symbol What two events do flowers symbolize for the people in the town?

There wasn't really a Stan of Stan's Hardware. Dick Wilcox was the owner, and since he'd never liked his own name, he gave his store half the name of his childhood hero, Stan Laurel in the movies. Dick had been married for twenty-seven years. Once, his wife Helen had dropped a German chocolate cake on his head at a Lion's Club dance, so Dick and Helen were not likely candidates for the honest expression of the flowers in those clear mason jars lining the windows of Stan's Hardware, and **speculation** had to move on to Dolores.

Dolores was the assistant manager at Stan's and had worked there for twenty years, since high school. She knew the store like a mother knows her baby, so Dick—who had trouble keeping up with things like prices and new brands of drywall compound²—tried to keep himself busy in the back and give Dolores the run of the floor. This worked fine because the carpenters and plumbers and painters in town trusted Dolores and took her advice to heart. They also liked her tattoo.

Dolores was the only woman in town with a tattoo. On the days she went sleeveless, one could see it on the taut brown skin of her upper arm: "Howl at the Moon." The picture was of a baying coyote which must have been a dark gray in its early days but which had faded to the color of the spackling paste Dolores stocked in the third aisle. Nobody had gotten out of Dolores the true story behind the tattoo. Some of the men who came in liked to show off their own, and they'd roll up their sleeves or pull open their shirts, exhibiting bald eagles and rattlesnakes, and they'd try to coax out of Dolores the history of her coyote. All of the men had gotten their tattoos when they were in the service, drunk on weekend,

2 **Drywall compound** and **spackling paste** (mentioned in the next paragraph) are used to prepare walls before painting.

Vocabulary

speculation (spek'yə lā'shən) *n.* the act of forming an opinion or conclusion based on guesswork

leave and full of the spittfire³ of young soldiers. Dolores had never been in the service and she'd never seen weekend leave and there wasn't a tattoo parlor anywhere near. They couldn't figure why or where any half-sober woman would have a howling coyote ground into the soft skin of her upper arm. But Dolores wasn't telling.

That the flowers in Stan's front window had anything to do with Dolores seemed completely **improbable**. As far as anyone knew, Dolores had never been in love nor had anyone ever been in love with her. Some believed it was the tattoo, of course, or the fine dark hair coating Dolores's upper lip which kept suitors away. Some felt it was because Dolores was just more of a man than most of the men in town, and fellows couldn't figure out how to court someone who knew more about the carburetor of a car or the back side of a washing machine than they did. Others thought Dolores simply didn't want love. This was a popular theory among the women in town who sold Avon and Mary Kay cosmetics. Whenever one of them ran into the hardware for a package of light bulbs or some batteries, she would mentally pluck every one of the black hairs above Dolores's lip. Then she'd wash that grease out of Dolores's hair, give her a good blunt cut, dress her in a decent silk-blend blouse with a nice Liz Claiborne skirt from the Sports line, and, finally, tone down that swarthy, longshoreman⁴ look of Dolores's with a concealing beige foundation, some frosted peach lipstick, and a good gray liner for the eyes.

Dolores simply didn't want love, the Avon lady would think as she walked back to her car carrying her little bag of batteries. If she did, she'd fix herself up.

The man who was in love with Dolores and who brought her zinnias and cornflowers and nasturtiums and

3 When soldiers are off duty and allowed to go off base, they're on **leave**. When they're full of **spittfire**, they're quick-tempered and ready to fight.

4 A **swarthy longshoreman** is a dark or sunburned dockworker.

Vocabulary

improbable (im prob'ə bəl) *adj.* not likely

#2

Draw Conclusions About Characters Notice the details in the description of Dolores. What conclusions are you forming about her?

marigolds and asters and four-o'clocks in clear mason jars did not know any of this. He did not know that men showed Dolores their tattoos. He did not know that Dolores understood how to use and to sell a belt sander. He did not know that Dolores needed some concealing beige foundation so she could get someone to love her. The man who brought flowers to Dolores on Wednesdays when the hardware opened its doors at 7:00 A.M. didn't care who Dolores had ever been or what anyone had ever thought of her. He loved her and he wanted to bring her flowers.

Ernie had lived in this town all of his life and had never before met Dolores. He was thirty-three years old, and for thirty-one of those years he had lived at home with his mother in a small, dark house on the edge of town near Beckwith's Orchards. Ernie had been a beautiful baby, with a shock of shining black hair and large blue eyes and a round, wise face. But as he had grown, it had become clearer and clearer that though he was indeed a perfectly beautiful child, his mind had not developed with the same perfection. Ernie would not be able to speak in sentences until he was six years old. He would not be able to count the apples in a bowl until he was eight. By the time he was ten, he could sing a simple song. At age twelve, he understood what a joke was. And when he was twenty, something he saw on television made him cry.

Ernie's mother kept him in the house with her because it was easier, so Ernie knew nothing of the world except this house. They lived, the two of them, in tiny dark rooms always **illuminated** by the glow of a television set, Ernie's bags of Oreos and Nutter Butters littering the floor, his baseball cards scattered across the sofa, his heavy winter coat thrown over the arm of a chair so he could wear it whenever he wanted, and his box of Burpee seed packages sitting in the middle of the kitchen table.

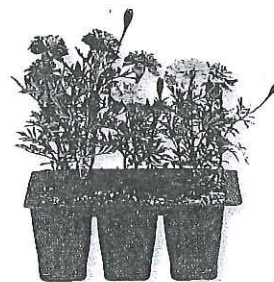
These Ernie cherished. The seeds had been delivered to his home by mistake. One day a woman wearing a brown uniform had pulled up in a brown truck, walked quickly

Vocabulary

illuminated (i lōō' mā nāt id) *adj.* lit up

Visual Vocabulary

Marigolds are yellow, orange, or red flowers. Some have strongly scented leaves.



#3

Draw Conclusions About Character From the details in the paragraph, what impressions are you forming of Ernie?

to the front porch of Ernie's house, set a box down, and with a couple of toots of her horn, driven off again. Ernie had watched her through the curtains, and when she was gone, had ventured⁵ onto the porch and shyly, cautiously, picked up the box. His mother checked it when he carried it inside. The box didn't have their name on it but the brown truck was gone, so whatever was in the box was theirs to keep. Ernie pulled off the heavy tape, his fingers trembling, and found inside the box more little packages of seeds than he could count. He lifted them out, one by one, and examined the beautiful photographs of flowers on each. His mother was not interested, had returned to the television, but Ernie sat down at the kitchen table and quietly looked at each package for a long time, his fingers running across the slick paper and outlining the shapes of zinnias and cornflowers and nasturtiums and marigolds and asters and four-o'clocks, his eyes drawing up their colors.

Two months later Ernie's mother died. A neighbor found her at the mailbox beside the road. People from the county courthouse came out to get Ernie, and as they ushered him from the home he would never see again, he picked up the box of seed packages from his kitchen table and passed through the doorway.

Eventually Ernie was moved to a large white house near the main street of town. This house was called a group home, because in it lived a group of people who, like Ernie, could not live on their own. There were six of them. Each had his own room. When Ernie was shown the room that would be his, he put the box of Burpee seeds—which he had kept with him since his mother's death—on the little table beside the bed and then he sat down on the bed and cried.

Ernie cried every day for nearly a month. And then he stopped. He dried his tears and he learned how to bake refrigerator biscuits and how to dust mop and what to do if the indoor plants looked brown.

Ernie loved watering the indoor plants and it was this pleasure which finally drew him outside. One of the

#4

Symbol What object or objects may be emerging as a symbol?

⁵ If you *ventured* somewhere, you went despite possible risk or danger.

young men who worked at the group home—a college student named Jack—grew a large garden in the back of the house. It was full of tomato vines and the large yellow blossoms of healthy squash. During his first summer at the house, Ernie would stand at the kitchen window, watching Jack and sometimes a resident of the home move among the vegetables. Ernie was curious, but too afraid to go into the garden.

Then one day when Ernie was watching through the window, he noticed that Jack was ripping open several slick little packages and emptying them into the ground. Ernie panicked and ran to his room. But the box of Burpee seeds was still there on his table, untouched. He grabbed it, slid it under his bed, then went back through the house and out into the garden as if he had done this every day of his life.

He stood beside Jack, watching him empty seed packages into the soft black soil, and as the packages were emptied, Ernie asked for them, holding out his hand, his eyes on the photographs of red radishes and purple eggplant. Jack handed the empty packages over with a smile and with that gesture became Ernie's first friend.

Jack tried to explain to Ernie that the seeds would grow into vegetables but Ernie could not believe this until he saw it come true. And when it did, he looked all the more intently⁶ at the packages of zinnias and cornflowers and the rest hidden beneath his bed. He thought more deeply about them but he could not carry them to the garden. He could not let the garden have his seeds.

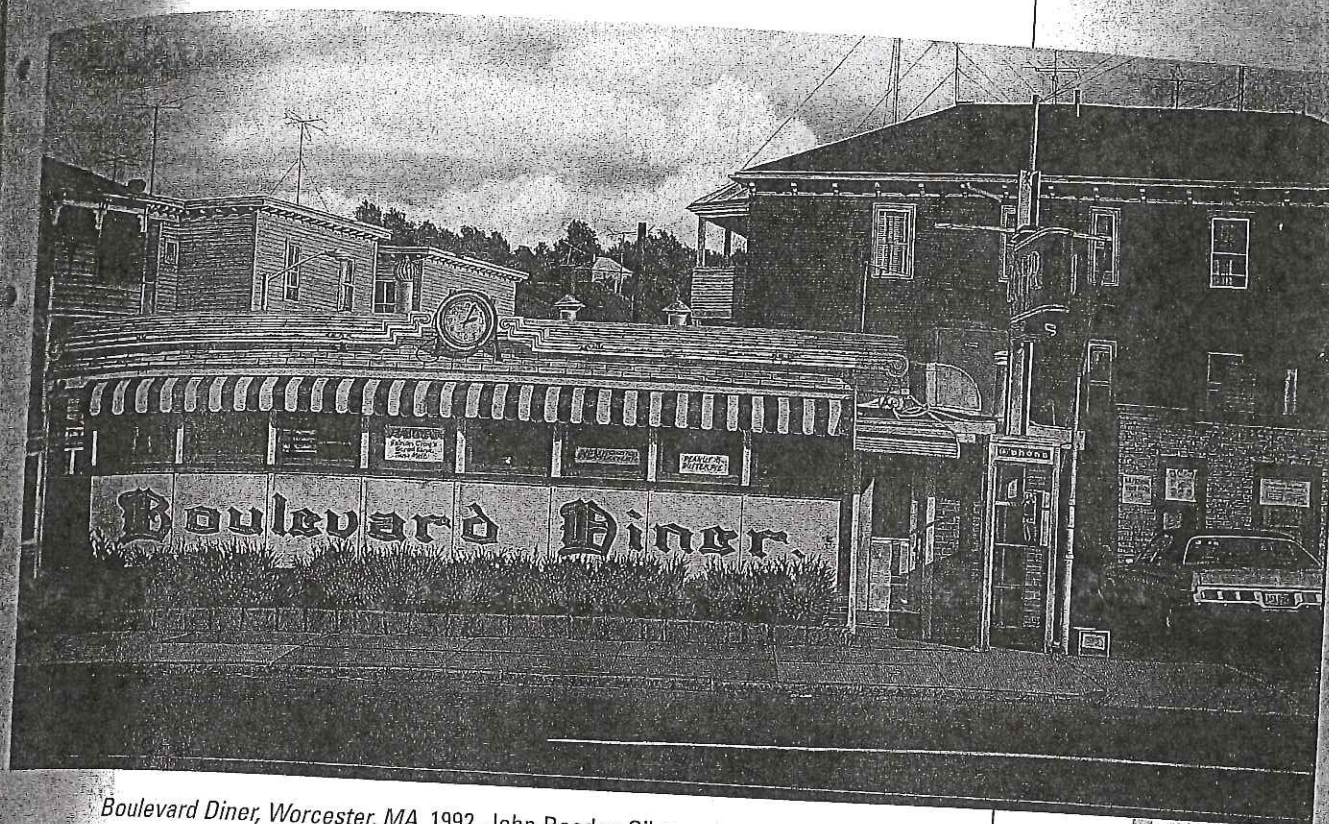
That was the first year in the large white house.

The second year, Ernie saw Dolores, and after that he thought of nothing else but her and of the photographs of flowers beneath his bed.

Jack had decided to take Ernie downtown for breakfast every Wednesday morning to ease him into the world outside that of the group home. They left very early, at 5:45 A.M., so there would be few people and almost no traffic to frighten Ernie and make him beg for his room. Jack and Ernie drove to the Big Boy restaurant which sat

6 If you looked *intently* at an object, you looked at it in a firmly focused way.

#5
Draw Conclusions About
Characters Based on
Jack's actions, what
conclusion can you draw
about him?



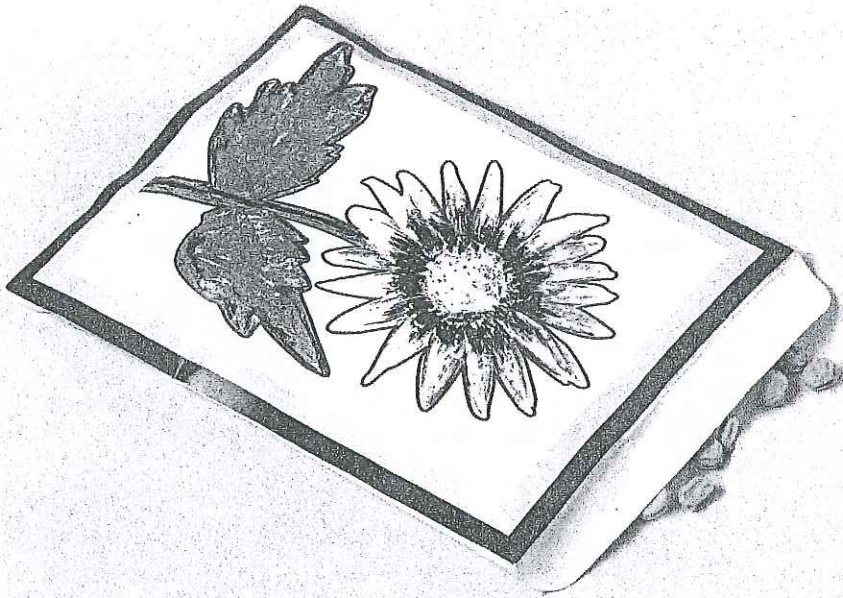
Boulevard Diner, Worcester, MA, 1992. John Baeder. Oil on canvas, 30 1/4 x 48 1/4 in. O.K. Harris Works of Art, NY.

View the Art While Ernie was eating breakfast at the Big Boy restaurant, his life changed. Whose life might be changed at the diner in this painting?

across the street from Stan's Hardware. There they ate eggs and bacon and French toast among those whose work demanded rising before the sun: bus drivers, policemen, nurses, mill workers. Their first time in the Big Boy, Ernie was too nervous to eat. The second time, he could eat but he couldn't look up. The third time, he not only ate everything on his plate, but he lifted his head and he looked out the window of the Big Boy restaurant toward Stan's Hardware across the street. There he saw a dark-haired woman in jeans and a black T-shirt unlocking the front door of the building, and that was the moment Ernie started loving Dolores and thinking about giving up his seeds to the soft black soil of Jack's garden.

Love is such a mystery, and when it strikes the heart of one as mysterious as Ernie himself, it can hardly be spoken of. Ernie could not explain to Jack why he went directly to his room later that morning, pulled the box of

46
Draw Conclusions About Characters Why do you think Ernie is changing?



Burpee seeds from under his bed, then grabbed Jack's hand in the kitchen and walked with him to the garden where Ernie had come to believe things would grow. Ernie handed the packets of seeds one by one to Jack, who stood in silent admiration of the lovely photographs before asking Ernie several times, "Are you sure you want to plant these?" Ernie was sure. It didn't take him very long, and when the seeds all lay under the moist black earth, Ernie carried his empty packages inside the house and spent the rest of the day spreading them across his bed in different arrangements.

That was in June. For the next several Wednesdays at 7:00 A.M. Ernie watched every movement of the dark-haired woman behind the lighted windows of Stan's Hardware. Jack watched Ernie watch Dolores, and **discreetly** said nothing.

When Ernie's flowers began growing in July, Ernie spent most of his time in the garden. He would watch the garden for hours, as if he expected it suddenly to move or to impress him with a quick trick. The fragile green stems of

Vocabulary

discreetly (dis krēt'lē) *adv.* in a manner showing good judgment

#7

Symbol What do you think the flower packages symbolize to Ernie?

#8

Draw Conclusions About Character What can you conclude about Jack from his discreet action?

his flowers stood uncertainly in the soil, like baby colts on their first legs, but the young plants performed no magic for Ernie's eyes. They saved their shows for the middle of the night and next day surprised Ernie with tender small blooms in all the colors the photographs had promised.

The flowers grew fast and hardy,⁷ and one early Wednesday morning when they looked as big and bright as their pictures on the empty packages, Ernie pulled a glass canning jar off a dusty shelf in the basement of his house. He washed the jar, half filled it with water, then carried it to the garden where he placed in it one of every kind of flower he had grown. He met Jack at the car and rode off to the Big Boy with the jar of flowers held tight between his small hands. Jack told him it was a beautiful bouquet.

When they reached the door of the Big Boy, Ernie stopped and pulled at Jack's arm, pointing to the building across the street. "OK," Jack said, and he led Ernie to the front door of Stan's Hardware. It was 6:00 A.M. and the building was still dark. Ernie set the clear mason jar full of flowers under the sign that read "Closed," then he smiled at Jack and followed him back across the street to get breakfast.

When Dolores arrived at seven and picked up the jar of zinnias and cornflowers and nasturtiums and marigolds and asters and four-o'clocks, Ernie and Jack were watching her from a booth in the Big Boy. Each had a wide smile on his face as Dolores put her nose to the flowers. Ernie giggled. They watched the lights of the hardware store come up and saw Dolores place the clear mason jar on the ledge of the front window. They drove home still smiling.

All the rest of that summer Ernie left a jar of flowers every Wednesday morning at the front door of Stan's Hardware. Neither Dick Wilcox nor Dolores could figure out why the flowers kept coming, and each of them assumed somebody had a crush on the other. But the flowers had an effect on them anyway. Dick started spending more time out on the floor making conversation with the customers, while Dolores stopped wearing T-shirts

⁷ *Hardy* means "strong and healthy."

to work and instead wore crisp white blouses with the sleeves rolled back off her wrists. Occasionally she put on a bracelet.

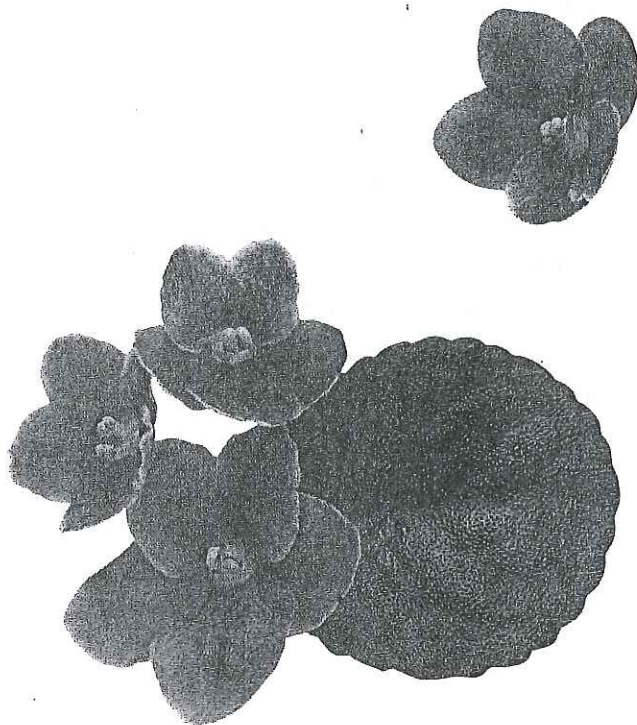
By summer's end Jack and Ernie had become very good friends, and when the flowers in the garden behind their house began to wither, and Ernie's face began to grow gray as he watched them, Jack brought home one bright day in late September a great long box. Ernie followed Jack as he carried it down to the basement and watched as Jack pulled a long glass tube from the box and attached this tube to the wall above a table. When Jack plugged in the tube's electric cord, a soft lavender light washed the room.

"Sunshine," said Jack.

Then he went back to his car for a smaller box. He carried this down to the basement where Ernie still stood staring at the strange light. Jack handed Ernie the small box, and when Ernie opened it he found more little packages of seeds than he could count, with new kinds of photographs on the slick paper.

"Violets," Jack said, pointing to one of them.

Then he and Ernie went outside to get some dirt.



#9

Draw Conclusions About Character Why do the flowers change the behavior of the people who work at Stan's Hardware?

#10

BQ **BIG Question**

How do Jack's actions show that he cares about Ernie and wants to help Ernie live a more fulfilling life?

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After You Read

Respond and Think Critically

1. Whom do Dolores and Dick Wilcox think the flowers are for? [Recall]
2. When you see flowers, what do they make you think of? Why? Explain. [Connect]
3. Why do you think the women in town judge Dolores the way they do? [Interpret]
4. Why does Ernie like his seed packages so much? Explain. [Infer]
5. What makes Jack a good caretaker and friend for Ernie? Support your answer with details from the story. [Evaluate]
6. **BQ** **BIG Question** How does Ernie's crush change his life and the lives of the other three characters in the story? Explain. [Analyze]

Vocabulary Practice

Match each boldfaced vocabulary word with a word from the right column that has the same meaning. Two of the words in the right column will not have matches. Then write an original sentence using each vocabulary word, or draw a picture that represents the word.

- | | |
|-----------------------|---------------|
| 1. excess | a. cautiously |
| 2. illuminated | b. hastily |
| 3. discreetly | c. unlikely |
| 4. improbable | d. extra |
| 5. speculation | e. punctured |
| | f. assumption |
| | g. brightened |

Example:

excess

Sentence: When we doubled the cake recipe, we used the excess batter to make cupcakes.

Academic Vocabulary

Born in 1954, Cynthia Rylant is a **contemporary** author who continues to fill her stories with characters that today's young people can relate to. Using context clues, try to figure out the meaning of the word *contemporary* in the preceding sentence. Check your guess in a dictionary.

TIP

Interpreting

To answer question 3, use details from the story and your own understanding of how people interact.

- Start by reviewing the description of Dolores. Then review the description of the other women. How is Dolores different from the other women?
- Think about what you know about people who are different from those around them. How do others often treat such people? Why?

FOLDABLES Study Organizer Keep track of your ideas about the **BIG Question** in your unit Foldable.

LOG ON Literature Online

Selection Resources

For Selection Quizzes, eFlashcards, and Reading-Writing Connection activities, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL29763u3.

Literary Element Symbol

1. What does Dolores's tattoo symbolize to the people of the town? Explain.
2. In the story, what objects or events represent change for Ernie? Explain.

Review: Mood

As you learned on page 195, **mood** is the emotional quality or atmosphere of a story. Descriptive words, setting, dialogue, and characters' actions can all contribute to the mood of a story.

3. What, in your opinion, is the mood of the story? Use details from the story to support your answer.
4. Explain how dialogue and setting contributed to the mood of the story. Give specific examples in your answer.

Reading Strategy

Draw Conclusions About Characters

Test Skills Practice

5. According to the story, how did Jack influence Ernie's life?
 - A He helped Ernie learn to garden and eased him into the outside world.
 - B He showed Ernie how to eat breakfast foods at the Big Boy restaurant.
 - C He persuaded Ernie to open his seed packages and plant the seeds.
 - D He taught Ernie how to talk to Dolores at the hardware store.

Grammar Link

Modifiers Two kinds of **modifiers**, or describing words, are adjectives and adverbs.

Adjectives are words that modify nouns and pronouns by answering these questions: Which one? What kind? How many?

I like that flower. (*Which one? that flower*)

I like red flowers. (*What kind? red flowers*)

I picked two flowers. (*How many? two flowers*)

Adverbs are words that modify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. Adverbs answer these questions: How? When? How often? Where? How much?

We ate breakfast quickly. (*How? quickly*)

I visited the garden today. (*When? today*)

We weed the garden daily. (*How often? daily*)

Plant the vegetables here. (*Where? here*)

It is too hot to work in the garden today. (*How much? too*)

Practice Find two adjectives and two adverbs in "A Crush." Then write two of your own sentences. One sentence should contain an adjective, and the other should contain an adverb.

Speaking and Listening

Literature Groups There are some unanswered questions in this story: Why didn't Dick Wilcox or Dolores try to find out who sent the flowers? Why didn't someone from the restaurant see Ernie and Jack leaving the flowers? With a group, discuss possible responses to these questions. Use details from the story and your own experience to support your answers.