

A Teacher's Guide to

The DYEING ROOM

By Robert T. McMaster

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

SETTING: *The Dyeing Room* is an historical novel about life in an American industrial city in the nineteen-teens. The setting is Holyoke, Massachusetts, but this is a story that could have occurred in any American city a century ago.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: The nineteen-teens was a period of rapid economic change driven by remarkable technological advances such as electricity, the automobile, and the telephone. Economic progress was aided by the arrival of immigrants willing to work for low wages under difficult conditions. Worker unrest was increasing but union organizers were widely suspected of harboring anti-American sentiments. Women were struggling for the vote and for a greater role in society. The story begins shortly after the United States entered the First World War.

MAIN CHARACTERS: The central characters include 18-year-olds Jack Bernard and Tom Wellington, Tom's younger sister Anne, and Anne's best friend, Carolyn Ford. The Bernard family is French-Canadian, having immigrated from Québec shortly after Jack's birth. The Wellington family is one of the most prominent families in Holyoke; Tom's father and uncle own Wellington Textiles. Jack has been accepted to college, but is working at the Wellington mill for a year to save money for his education. Tom has just returned to Holyoke after spending several months in a clinic dealing with his personal problems. Anne and Carolyn are about to graduate from Holyoke High School.

THEMES: Coping with change is a central theme of *The Dyeing Room*. The sudden mobilization of the nation for war strains families and threatens to unravel the delicate social fabric of America's cities, turning neighbor against neighbor, friend against friend, worker against co-worker. The lives of all four young people are rocked by a series of shocking and unanticipated events.

TEACHING WITH *THE DYEING ROOM*

High school and upper middle school readers are easily engaged by the story of *The Dyeing Room*. It has something for every reader: mystery, drama, humor, romance. The book immerses us in the lives of four teenagers just as America entered The Great War in Europe. It was a tumultuous time in American history, but an era that has more in common with today's world than we might expect.

This guide is offered to aid teachers who wish to use *The Dyeing Room* as part of a language arts, social studies, or other academic program.

Part I: Enrichment activities for individuals, small groups, and classes. Activities may be used before, during, or after the reading of *The Dyeing Room*. Subject areas include language arts, social studies, science, math, and technology.

Part II: Additional resources, available either in print or on-line, for use by teachers and students.



PART II: ENRICHMENT ACTIVITIES**LANGUAGE ARTS****A. Characters**

1. Choose one of the characters from *The Dyeing Room* listed below. Describe the character in enough detail so that someone who has not read the book can understand the character. Include physical appearance, personality traits, strengths and weaknesses.

Jack Bernard	Anne Wellington
Charles Bernard	Carolyn Ford
Marie Bernard	Nina Calavetti (Carolyn's mother)
Claire Bernard	John Garfield
Émile Bousquet	Adrienne Garfield
Father Lévesque	Jim Trottiere
Tom Wellington	Chester Arthur Digsworth the Third (Digsy)
Helen Wellington	Mr. Tuttle
Thomas Wellington, Sr. (Tom's father)	Jan Krawczyk
Richard Wellington (Tom's uncle)	

2. Choose a character from the list and discuss how the character changed over the course of the story. Identify important influences on the character such as other characters or events.

3. Choose two characters from the list who were friends. Discuss their friendship. What made them good friends? What characteristics did they have in common? Were they different in other ways? Here are a few examples:

Jack Bernard and Tom Wellington	Carolyn Ford and Jan Krawczyk
Anne Wellington and Carolyn Ford	Helen Wellington and Nina Calavetti
Jack Bernard and Émile Bousquet	Tom Wellington and Digsy

4. Choose a character who was faced with an important decision. Explain the situation and the character's decision. Imagine what might have happened if the character had decided differently. Here are a few examples:

Jack's decision to break off with Anne
John Garfield's decision to contact Carolyn
Tom's decision to spend the summer on Cape Cod
Carolyn's decision to leave home
Tom's decision to go to Lowell
Tom's decision to enlist in the Navy
Carolyn's decision to accept Tom's marriage proposal

5. Although Jack and Tom are best friends, their families are quite different. Compare and contrast the two families.

6. Jack's illness leads him to ask many questions about his life and his future. Discuss the questions he pondered and how he answered them by the end of the story.

7. Early in *The Dyeing Room*, Carolyn Ford is described as seldom smiling. What about her life might explain this? Does her mood seem to change by the end of the book. If so, why?

B. Plot

1. The story of *The Dyeing Room* has a number of subplots. One has to do with Jack's new job in the dyehouse and how it affects him. Try to identify and briefly describe three other important subplots found in the book. Early in the book these subplots seem unrelated. Explain how the subplots come to be connected by the end of the book.
2. Conflict is an important part of many stories and occurs in different forms: physical fights, verbal disagreements, and misunderstandings between characters. What examples of conflict between characters are important in *The Dyeing Room*?
3. Every good story has a surprise or two for the reader. What surprises or unexpected turns of event can you recall from *The Dyeing Room*?
4. Writers often give hints or clues about the conclusion of a book earlier in the book, a literary device known as foreshadowing. What examples of foreshadowing can you recall from *The Dyeing Room*?
5. Sometimes an author will intentionally include details in a story meant to trick or deceive the reader. Can you recall any such devices in *The Dyeing Room*?

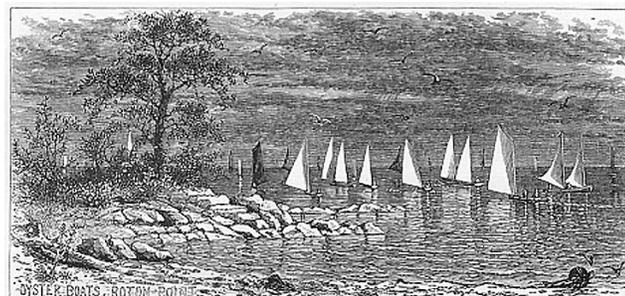
C. Vocabulary

Below is a list of words and expressions from *The Dyeing Room* that were common a century ago but may not be familiar to today's readers. Pick a term from the list that is new to you, define it, then explain how it was used in the book. One page number is provided for each.

Dihedrals (2)
 Percheron (3)
 Harrowing (3)
 Feathering (4)
 Brooch (6)
 Flagstone (6)
 Diphtheria (8)
 Spats (9)
 Phlegmatic (10)
 Dyehouse (19)
 Parapet (20)
 Block and tackle (25)
 Dilapidated (30)
 Galoshes (31)
 Retching (46)
 Orator (49)

Travelogue (60)
 Kaiser (61)
 Brogue (70)
 Lasts (72)
 Tortoiseshell (76)
 Mansard (83)
 Temperance (86)
 Stoneware (91)
 Epilepsy (93)
 Seizure (106)
 Glasshouse (111)
 Polynesian (115)
 Devotions (133)
 Cloister (140)
 Godspeed (140)
 Penurious (148)

Duck trousers (153)
 Graniteware (164)
 Irrigation (168)
 Frigate (174)
 Divan (180)
 Valise (190)
 Bolshevik (192)
 Clothier (206)
 Summer kitchen (210)
 Isinglass (218)
 Draft board (229)
 Paymaster (239)
 Sedition (247)
 Poplin (296)
 CIPHERING (297)



D. Quotations

- a. In Chapter 5, page 35, Jack says to his father, "I guess I understand how people feel...after the *Lusitania* and now the *SS New York*." What were the *Lusitania* and the *SS New York* and what does Jack mean by this comment?
- b. In Chapter 28, p. 169, Jack says to Émile about his illness, "It's so maddening, Émile, trying to make people understand what I'm saying, what I'm goin' through. Do you know what I mean?" Émile replies, "Ayeh, ayeh. I know wash a mean, Jay-Jay, I sher do." Explain why Émile feels he understands what Jack is talking about.
- c. In Chapter 51 Anne says "'Wow, Jackie, it is a new world, isn't it?'" Jack nods and replies, "Ayeh, it is that." In what ways was it a new world in the eyes of Anne and Jack?

E. Reader's theatre

Working with 2 or 3 classmates, choose a scene from *The Dyeing Room* that you and your classmates enjoyed or found especially memorable. Assigns roles, write out dialogue, then rehearse and perform the scene in front of the rest of the class. Scenes that might work well include

- a. Chapter 13, pages 78 – 82, Carolyn and Tom discussing the letter Carolyn has received.
- b. Chapter 21, pages 127 - 131, Tom and Jack talking by the river.
- c. Chapter 22, pages 136 – 140, Jack and Father Lévesque discussing Jack's illness.
- d. Chapter 38, pages 223 – 224, Carolyn apologizing to Nina.
- e. Chapter 40, pages 235 - 236, Tom's conversation with his uncle Richard. [The chapter ends in the middle of their conversation; try to finish that conversation.]
- f. Chapter 47, pages 276 – 281, Carolyn and Tom picnicking at Pequot Park.

F. Writing fiction

If you enjoy reading historical novels such as *The Dyeing Room*, maybe you'd like to try writing historical fiction. Choose a time period in the past that interests you and that you know something about. Create two characters living in that time. Then imagine the characters discussing something about their lives or their community. Write just enough dialogue so that a reader will be interested in your characters. Then share your scene with a classmate and see how he or she reacts. Here are a few ideas:

- a. Imagine you are fourteen years old and living in Holyoke or other American industrial city a century ago. You have just completed grade eight and your parents announce that you must drop out of school and go to work in a mill like Wellington Textiles. Write some dialogue of a scene between you and your parents discussing the matter.
- b. Imagine two young workers at Wellington Textiles, one Irish and one French-Canadian, on the day that the pay cuts and the death of Yvonne Gilbert take place. Write some dialogue between the two workers showing different reactions.

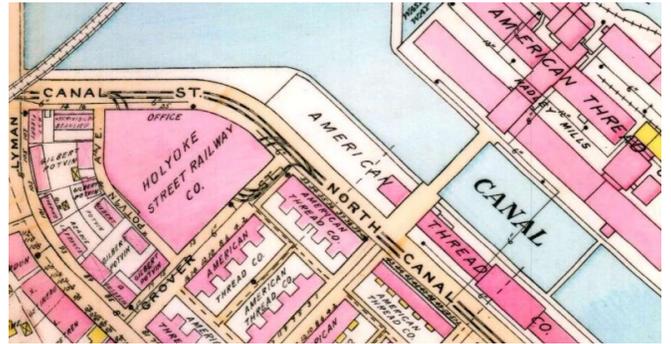
SOCIAL STUDIES**A. History**

- 1. CHILD LABOR LAWS:** In *The Dyeing Room* Jack Bernard drops out of school in grade eight to work at Wellington Textiles. At one time children could go to work at age ten or even younger, sometimes working difficult and dangerous jobs. Today we have laws that restrict children from working at such jobs. Research the history of child labor laws in the United States. List the major laws that were enacted, the dates of those laws, and the restrictions they imposed for child safety. Find some old photographs such as those of Lewis Hine that document child labor practices in that era (early 1900s) or earlier.
- 2. WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE:** At the time of *The Dyeing Room* women were not allowed to vote. Research the history of women's suffrage in the United States. Name some of the leaders of the women's suffrage movement and describe their roles in the suffrage movement. Create a time line showing the major events in the history of women's suffrage in the U.S.
- 3. TROLLEYS AND THE AUTOMOBILE:** A century ago the trolley was the most important mode of transportation in many American cities and towns. Research the history of trolleys in the U.S. When did trolleys first appear? Why were they so successful? When and why did many cease operation? Name some American cities where trolleys operate today.
- 4. WORKER RIGHTS AND UNIONS:** Workers at Wellington Textiles were careful not to discuss unions or engage in any union-related activity while working for fear of being dismissed. What laws were eventually enacted that protected workers' rights?
- 5. THE SETTLEMENT MOVEMENT:** The Holyoke Women's Home is an example of what were known as "settlement houses" in American cities of that era. Research the subject of settlement houses. What was their role in cities of that time? Who were some leaders of the settlement movement? Do we have organizations of that type in our cities today?
- 6. THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY:** The American textile industry underwent great changes between 1800 and 1915. Research the process of making cotton or woolen clothing before and after that revolution in manufacturing occurred.
- 7. THE TEMPERANCE MOVEMENT:** The temperance movement was a very important social movement of the early twentieth century in the U.S. Research the movement. What was it about? What was "prohibition" and when did it become law?
- 8. ALCOHOLISM:** Attitudes toward alcoholism began to change in the U.S. in the early 20th century. Research the history of alcoholism, how public attitudes toward people with drinking problems changed and how treatments for alcoholism changed.
- 9. IMMIGRATION:** Much of the success of the American textile industry a century ago was due to the availability of workers who had only recently immigrated to the U.S. Find out what countries or regions most immigrants to the U.S. came from between 1850 and 1915, what opportunities they had, and what challenges they faced.
- 10. FRENCH-CANADIAN IMMIGRATION:** French-speaking Canadians came to cities of the northeastern United States in large numbers in the late 19th century. Research this phenomenon and explain why it occurred, what attracted French-Canadians to the U.S. at that time, and what problems or challenges they faced in their new home.
- 11. ELECTRIFICATION:** The introduction of electricity in homes changed the lives of all Americans. Find out when this occurred in your hometown and what effects it had on everyday life in American homes.
- 12. WORLD WAR I:** World War I began in 1914, yet the United States did not enter the war until 1917. Why did America not enter the war earlier? What events led to the Declaration of War in April, 1917?
- 13. LIFE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES:** What was it like to be deaf in the era of *The Dyeing Room*? What are some important differences between life for Émile back then compared to today? What are some similarities?

B. Geography

1. The streets of downtown Holyoke have changed very little in a century. Find a current street map of Holyoke and print it out, then mark each of the following locations:

- The Wellingtons' house (corner of Cabot and Beech Streets)
- The Women's Home (Maple Street near Suffolk Street)
- Gregoire's Shoe Shop (High Street near the intersection of High & Dwight)
- Wellington Textile mill (Race Street on the Second Level Canal)
- Holyoke High School (Hampshire Street between Pine and Beech Streets)
- The streetcar line from Holyoke to Westfield (from High Street to Sargeant Street to Northampton Street to Cherry Street)
- Holyoke City Hall (High Street between Dwight and Appleton)



2. On a larger map of modern day western Massachusetts try to locate the following:

- Holyoke
- Downtown Westfield
- Hampton Ponds on the Holyoke/Westfield border
- The route of the Holyoke-Westfield trolley line (High St. to Sargeant St. to Northampton St. to Cherry St., then southwest to Westfield)
- Lowell and Westford, Massachusetts

3. Locate a map of your hometown a century ago. If there were streetcars in your town, try to find out where the lines ran. How had your city or town changed in the last 100 years?

MATH, SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY

1. The average speed of a streetcar was about 20 miles per hour. At that rate how long was Jack's ride from his home in Westfield to the mill in Holyoke, a distance of about 8 miles?
2. Jack's first job at Wellington Textiles paid 35 cents per hour. He usually worked 10 hours a day, five days a week. How much money did he earn in a normal week?
3. What role did Jack's knowledge of chemistry play in solving the mystery of the warehouse fire and freeing Tom? What did Émile find out about coal naphtha and how?
4. Wellington Textiles was located on the "second level canal" in Holyoke. Much of Holyoke's canal system is still intact today. Find out about Holyoke's canal system, draw it or print a map of it, and explain what made it truly revolutionary for its time.
5. How did a textile mill like Wellington Textiles use water power? Learn about harnessing water power for industry, past and present. Find a good illustration that shows a water-powered mill or factory and explain in your own words how it works.
6. How did an electric streetcar or trolley work? Find out how and where the electricity was generated, how it was delivered to each car on a line, and how a trolley car was operated.

PART II: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Non-fiction: Some references for teachers or students wishing to learn more about early 20th century America.

A New Order of Things: How the Textile Industry Transformed New England by Paul E. Rivard, University Press of New England, 2002.

The Belles of New England: The Women of the Textile Mills and the Families Whose Wealth They Wove by William Moran, Thomas Dunne Books, 2002.

Charlottesville Woolen Mills: Working Life, Wartime, and the Walkout of 1918 by Andrew H. Myers, www.historicwoolenmills.org.

Daily Life in the Progressive Era by Steven L. Piott, Greenwood Press, 2011.

French-Canadian Heritage in New England by Gerard J. Brault, University Press of New England, 1986.

Lowell : the Story of an Industrial City by Thomas Dublin, National Park Service, 1992.

Historical Fiction: Novels depicting life in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

A Northern Light by Jennifer Donnell, Graphia Books, 2004. A teenage girl is unwittingly involved in a mysterious crime and learns about life and love during a summer working at a resort in the Adirondacks in the 1900s.

Adventures of Tom Sawyer by Mark Twain, 1876. Humor, satire, and drama in the life of a 12-year-old boy growing up along the Mississippi River in the 19th century.

Anne of Green Gables by Lucy Maud Montgomery, 1908. The hilarious and touching adventures of a young girl adopted by an elderly couple on a farm on Prince Edward Island, Canada, in the early 20th century.

Breaker Boys by Pat Hughes, Backshore Books, 2014. The 12-year-old son of a wealthy family in a Pennsylvania coal mining town befriends a boy from a working class family.

Call the Darkness Light by Nancy Zaroulis, Doubleday and Company, 1979. A frank, sometimes dark view of a young woman's life in Lowell, Massachusetts, in the 1840s and 1850s. An engrossing story for high school students and adults.

Daring Ladies of Lowell by Kate Alcott, Doubleday, 2014. A bold young woman working in a Lowell textile mill leads her co-workers in a strike while falling in love with the son of the mill owner.

Lyddie by Katherine Paterson, Lodestar Books, 1991. An endearing, uplifting story of a young Vermont farm girl who travels to Lowell, Massachusetts, in the 1840s to find work in a cotton mill. Well suited to middle school readers.

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