

Name _____ Date _____

The Travelers

The travelers, real travelers, came in late summer to hawk their wares. They wore exotic wrap dresses with bright colors that caught the sun and held it. They wore fabrics of deep red, green, orange, and other colors that blended together and became one enchanting color of magic. The travelers were enchanted, we were sure.

They were evanescent, like the summer, arriving and departing like a gust of wind. They had large caravans with pots, pans, tapestries, scarves, linens, cloths, perfumes, and exotic blends of meats and spices. The children ran wild, their skin darker than ours, their bare feet toughened from the sun and earth. Their hair was dark and scattered, and they were tough. These children could survive on just a scrap of life, and we knew it. We played marbles with them, cross-legged on the hot pavement. They always won. In the distance, we could hear the calls: "A dollar, a dollar, just a dollar. Bracelets, bangles, baubles, beads. A dollar, a dollar, just a dollar."

Sometimes we played dress-up, wrapping the scarves around our heads and waists, wobbling down the streets in satin heels. We were women of the world, going to market in strange cities, selecting goods for the trip home to London or Paris or even India. The women gave us scraps of cloth and jewelry for sewing. We held the stones to the light and caught the reflections of ourselves in ruby and emerald, the same, but somehow changed.

We always expected the travelers to come in late July, and they always did, in rickety caravans draped with shimmering textures of other lands and lives we would never know.

"Stay away from the travelers," the women of our town warned. "They're not like us." "They're not our kind." "Nothing but trouble if you ask me."

The travelers were different, but they never gave us any trouble. They stayed up late, when the fevered earth began to cool, and they played banjos and guitars, the tunes wafting through open windows with the smell of lilacs and red wine. We dreamed of hopping onto the caravan one night and leaving for another world under the stars, but we saw our parents, heard the soft chirruping of crickets in the garden, and knew we couldn't leave.

The travelers did leave, though. One summer the caravan never came. No rough talking little vagabond children, no tapestries, no reds, oranges, and greens woven into magic. No banjos or dancing or hawking: "A dollar, a dollar, just a dollar." No transients were allowed, they said. Instead, the streets were quiet, the pavement hot and bare. We all wore the same skirts, dresses, and shoes. We lived in the same row houses and everyone knew everyone in town. The sad-faced McCoy sisters went to church but liked their gin on the sly. Old Mr. Cory was rumored to have \$5,000 dollars stashed under his mattress, and in the summer, there was nothing to talk about but the heat. Even the air stood still. We stopped dreaming. Was it better this way? My sisters and I had to wonder.

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Vocabulary from “The Travelers”

1. The narrator uses the phrase “to hawk their wares.” What does this mean? Use the context to help you decide. Write down your answer.

2. Define “exotic.”

What does “evanescent” mean? Look at the words following “evanescent” to help you.

3. What are the “baubles” referred to in the first paragraph? Write down a guess based on the other items listed, and then check your guess with a dictionary.

4. In the second paragraph, the narrator uses the word “wafting.” Use context clues to determine its meaning. Write down your guess.

5. In the last paragraph, the author refers to “vagabond” children. What does this mean? Draw a picture representing the meaning of the word.

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Questions from “The Travelers”

First, discuss how authors sometimes directly state things. For example, the adults in the story have definite words to say about the travelers: “They’re not like us...They’re not our kind.” **Sometimes, authors give readers clues and expect their readers to use the clues to infer, or figure out something.** For example, the travelers are off during the summer, and the narrator is playing marbles with the travelers, sitting cross-legged on the pavement. This would suggest the narrator is a child, since children are usually off during the summer and would sit on hot pavement playing marbles. Also, adults are referred to as “the adults,” as if adults are separate.

Directions: Pick any TWO questions and write a thoughtful, well-reasoned paragraph about them. We’ll pass around the paragraph you would like to share, a classmate will read it silently, make comments or suggestions, and then we’ll all discuss our responses.

1. The author never states how old she is or her gender. If you had to guess, how old do you think the author was when the travelers came? How do you know?
2. Do you think the author is a child or an adult now? Please support your answer with evidence from the story.
3. How did the author feel about the travelers? How do you know?
4. What time period do you think the author is writing about? 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, or modern day? Even though the author never states the time period directly, what are some clues?
5. What would you think about these kinds of travelers in your community? Are we better off as communities to have people more like us or people of all different kinds? Please support your answer.
6. If you had to describe the narrator, how would you describe her? For example, is she tough and active, or is she more thoughtful? Why? What clues does the author give you?
7. How would you describe the travelers? What are the advantages of their lifestyle? The disadvantages?
8. When the travelers come, they come in the summer and seem magical to the narrator. When they don’t come one summer, the magic disappears. Compare this to the beginning and ending of childhood. In what ways do you think children know more than adults? Why might adults be more cautious?
9. The adults almost seem afraid of the travelers. Why might they be afraid?

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Additional Independent Writing Assignments

1. Write about a time when a person or an experience greatly influenced your life. How did it influence your life?
2. Write about someone you dislike and why. Are you a little bit afraid of the person? How do you think this makes you dislike the person?
3. Do you think getting to know someone better whom you dislike might change your opinion of that person? Why or why not?
4. Write about what has made you who you are today.
5. How do you think the narrator might have changed if she had run off with the travelers? Would they have accepted her? Why or why not?
6. Describe a magical time or experience in your life.
7. Write a description of an event so that the reader will feel as if he/she is really there. Be sure to include touch, taste, sound, sight, and smell.
8. Write about someone or something that changed you and made you different from who you would have been. For example, do you think the travelers changed the narrator's life? How would her life have been different if the travelers had never come?

Follow-Up Assignments:

Choose One

1. Correspond with an on-line pen pal in another country. Ask about local customs and traditions. How are people in your country viewed? How is this different from the way things really are? How do you view your pen pal's country? Write this down. Compare your view at the beginning to your view after you have been corresponding for several weeks.
2. Ask your grandparents or an older person what they think of young people today. Are their views accurate? Write down what you think of older people. Visit a nursing home or a senior center. Are your views different after you have more experience with these people?

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Vocabulary from “The Travelers”

1. to sell their goods
2. Strange, unusual, foreign
3. transitory, fleeting.
4. trinkets.
5. the aroma of something carried aloft.
6. beggars, tramps.

Questions from “The Travelers”

1. Please see above. The author sees the travelers as magical, and she plays marbles. Usually elementary-age children play marbles. Maybe six, seven, or eight years old.
2. She’s an adult now. She’s looking back on her experiences. The narrative is written in the past tense, and the travelers left.
3. She had mixed feelings. She saw them as magical and refers to them as “enchanted.” She states in the last paragraph that she’s not sure that things were better when the travelers left. Nevertheless, she refers to the children as “wild,” “vagabond,” and “tough,” suggesting the children intimidated her despite her awe of the travelers.
4. Early 1950s. Clues include the roving caravan, people calling out low prices for goods in neighborhoods, open windows though it is very hot, suggesting no air-conditioning for the whole neighborhood. People still knew everybody in the neighborhood, suggesting a time before 1960 when people were becoming more mobile.
5. This is a question with no right or wrong answer. A thoughtful, well-reasoned response is expected.
6. She’s observant, since she pays much attention to colors, people, smells, and what people have to say. She’s thoughtful. She seems to be taking everything in and thinking about it. She’s imaginative. She imagines going away with the travelers and pretends she’s a traveler. She’s sheltered, since she thinks of London and Paris as strange lands. She’s a little afraid, or timid, thinking of the children as “wild” and as “vagabonds,” but she’s curious too. She does approach the travelers.
7. The travelers are independent and live a nomadic lifestyle, going from place to place. This is an advantage, because they are not obligated to anyone and can do as they please. It’s a disadvantage, because they have no roots or connections with other people. They might feel lonely. The women seem kind, giving the neighborhood children cloth and beads for sewing.
8. The travelers’ stay is short and magical. Childhood is short and is often viewed as a magical time of life. In the beginning, the narrator dreams of travel and of visiting different places like Paris, London, or India. In the end, she stops dreaming and seems almost resigned to her way of life, resigned to the idea that adulthood will hold no magic, that it’s not a time of dreams. Perhaps the adults have given her this belief by not tolerating the different, or the magical. It is implied that the travelers were driven out of town. In some ways, children know more than adults in that they see people as people. They are more accepting. Adults might be more cautious, because they know more about the world and about bad things that can happen. They are trying to protect their children, but in protecting them, they sometimes suppress the magical.
9. The travelers are different. They’re loud; they don’t stay in one place, they’re not known, and they don’t fit into the community. The adults might be afraid because of their lack of experience with other ways of life.