

# Mrs. McKay and the Dead Pony

by Mary Lea Carroll

Illustration by Tony Wong

Curriculum developed by Tiffany Owens

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## OVERVIEW

### Quick Glance 10 Points for Usage Guide

Student Population	
Age/Grade Level Appropriateness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ages 11 and up</li> <li>• Grades 6 and up</li> </ul>
Genre/s	Narrative nonfiction, short story, memoir
Length	1,831 words
Content Advisories	Animals—a dead pony, eccentricity
One Sentence Summary	Young Mary’s curiosity leads her to seek out the mysterious and frightening Mrs. McKay’s estate, where she and her brother have their first lessons in taking chances, working hard, and learning that first impressions are not always what they seem.

Lesson Planning	
Topics & Key Themes Overview	<p>Topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsibility</li> <li>• Perseverance</li> <li>• Teamwork</li> <li>• Mortality— everything dies</li> <li>• Individuality and eccentricity</li> </ul> <p>Themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coming of age</li> <li>• First impressions and questioning them</li> <li>• Defying expectations</li> <li>• Overcoming personal limitations</li> <li>• Valuing diverse perspectives</li> <li>• Value of hard work</li> </ul>
Historic Events / Time Periods for Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• American social conventions of the 1950s</li> <li>• Pasadena and Altadena, California cultural history</li> </ul>
Complementary Classic and Historic Texts	<p>James Herriot’s <i>All Creatures Great and Small</i></p> <p>Note: Herriot’s works have the additional benefit of being memoirs like <i>Mrs. McKay and the Dead Pony</i> rather than fictional stories.</p>

Lesson Planning	
Author and Artists Information	<p>Mary Lea Carroll is a lifelong Pasadena resident and author.</p> <p>Tony Wong is an artist living in Los Angeles, CA.</p>
Key Common Core Standards (found in detail following the curriculum)	<p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.5, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4.C, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4.D, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.C, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.D, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.7, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.4</p>

## Author Biography

Mary Lea Carroll, a lifelong resident of Pasadena, falls back on the phrase, “one could die of encouragement in Hollywood,” because in her younger days she wrote numerous scripts, many of which almost went somewhere. When her children came along, she turned her writing energies to freelance journalism, memoir writing, and poetry. For many years, she was the read-aloud lady at school, the theatre mom for grades K-12, and taught kids’ creative writing. She produced the first Pasadena High School Theatre Festival at the Pasadena Playhouse. More recently, she has embarked on spoken word performance, and is currently working on a memoir collection entitled *The Mrs. McKay Stories*.

## Artist Biography

Tony Wong is an illustrator and printmaker originally from “The Big Easy,” the City of New Orleans. Currently residing in the LA area, he is a teaching assistant for printmaking at Pasadena City College, a Board Member of The Society of Illustrators of Los Angeles, and a working illustrator. He has curated for and participated in gallery shows around Los Angeles.

## SYNOPSIS

In this memoir excerpt, Mary and her brother have long heard stories about the eccentric old lady in their neighborhood who keeps a menagerie of animals on her estate. As curious, middle-class children in the 1950s, they have the luxury of summertime boredom, and take the

initiative to find out more about Mrs. McKay. In doing so, they encounter the first truly unexpected and unusual circumstances of their lives— including a dead pony—and a personality that defies convention. They also learn the exhaustion and satisfaction of hard work, which sets Mary on a path that defines her adolescence.

## CURRICULUM

### Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

#### Topic

This story is set against a backdrop of raising and caring for a variety of animals—some do jobs (like be high school mascots), some provide food for humans, and some are sold for other purposes (the guinea pigs go to Caltech, where they are used in experiments). First, consider and chart on the board all the ways in which humans use and interact with animals. Discuss how we treat them. Do we treat animals well? For example, is it ethical to use animals as mascots?

#### Main Ideas

In a journal entry, relate an incident that helped you mature in some way or taught you something important. Address the following points: How old were you? Where did this take place? Was it a single incident, or was it an experience that unfolded over a period of time? Who were the people involved in the experience? What was it that made the experience significant? What did you learn, and how did you mature from it?

Teacher’s Note: Tell students to choose an experience they won’t mind sharing with the class.

#### Passage-Specific Themes

Consider the following passage:

“Go home, you kids, and don’t bother us up here. I’m busy sorting greens for all the animals,’ she mumbled. ‘You must keep the lettuce separate from the vegetables.’ We turned to hurry away, but then she said, ‘Unless, that is unless, you’d like to work...’ We turned back toward her. ‘Do you want to work? Do you even know how to work with animals?’”

The two children in the story want to see the animals they have heard of and the strange old lady who keeps them. Why would an old lady send kids away who come to her property to see her collection of animals?

You may address this question in small groups, class discussion, or in a paragraph.

## Universal Themes

Referencing your initial journal writing exercise, discuss your growing-up experiences in small groups of four to five students for about 15 minutes. (Simply read your journal entry aloud, or briefly explain the experience to your small group.) As you listen to each other's stories, make notes about any similarities that may arise or overlap across your different experiences. Next, come together as a whole class and chart or list all the major elements or points that hallmark your growing-up experiences. Make a special note of those elements that are most frequently repeated across the whole class. Are there any universal elements that define a coming-of-age experience?

## Key Vocabulary

Definitions are very context-dependent. Make sure that any definitions you look up or work from are the ones that most correctly fit in the context of the story.

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
glossy	thumping	circulated
scowl	subdivided	loitering
trowels	squinty	cringing
dismay	gnarled	Mrs. (in contrast to Ms. or Miss—the concept of titles)
knobby	arthritic	

## Vocabulary Activity Options

1. Look up and define all the adjectives and adverbs which describe Mrs. McKay's appearance and behavior. What features of her personality and appearance is the author trying to emphasize the most? Why do those particular features make such a strong impression on young Mary?

2. Using all the phrases and vocabulary which describe her, both from the vocabulary list above and from any other parts of the story, write your own original, brief (two- to four-paragraph) vignette about Mrs. McKay.
3. Choose three of the vocabulary terms and create an illustrated dictionary that shows each word's meaning.

## Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

1. Were you shocked by the fact that there was a dead pony? How would you feel if you saw the dead pony? How did the pony die? (Cite the text!) Does it seem like Mrs. McKay cared about the pony? What about the children, did they care?

**Bonus:** The author juxtaposes the thrill of a new, exciting adventure with other kids against the grim reality of having to bury a little pony who has died. How does Mary, when her very first day was spent doing something so unpleasant, come to love the responsibility of working on the property and eventually spend five years with Mrs. McKay?

2. Mrs. McKay is eccentric and full of contradictions. How does she defy social conventions and expectations, bearing in mind that this is the 1950s? Would you want to meet and interact with a person like her? Would you want her in your neighborhood? Would you want your own children going to her house and doing what the children in the story do? Why or why not? Explain and discuss.

**Bonus:** Do you know someone who fits the definition of eccentric? Does it seem to be a positive trait or not? Explain.

3. In what ways do the children in the story display initiative and resourcefulness? (Refer to the text to support your ideas). Do you think children today would behave in the same way as the kids in Mrs. McKay's 1950s neighborhood? Would you? Why or why not?

## Text-Dependent Question Options

1. Mrs. McKay has been described as a “witch.” What does it mean to be a witch in the context of this story? Contrast this with other ideas and examples you may have heard of witches in literature, history, and contemporary society.
2. What characteristics of Mrs. McKay contribute to her reputation as a witch? What does she say and do that surprises the children and helps dispel her reputation as a witch?
3. Read the following passage, then answer the question below:

“Did you come to help?” Arthur called out hopefully. We nodded. The other kids gladly handed us rusty or splintery-handled shovels.

‘More help! Hooray! We’re saved!’ they called out. The kids were Judy and Arthur, twins, and eleven, as well. And Vicki and Ernie—she was eleven, but her brother was

still ten, like my brother Kevin. So we were already like a club. We jumped into the hole and began to dig and dig and dig. I had never touched a shovel before that day. As we all worked, they told us how to milk goats and collect eggs and feed and clean the animals. How the bee man came once a year to collect all the honey. How the sheerer man came once a year to sheer the sheep. How the guinea pigs got sold off to the labs at Caltech. How the chickens all came from Bullock's Department Store and their Easter window display of chicks hatching. And after a long time, with our hands aching and dirty, Arthur said it was okay, this hole was big enough."

Question: What is it about the children's task that bonds them into a team so quickly and makes them "already like a club?"

4. In the beginning of the story, Mary and her brother could be described as a little bit complacent or slightly timid. How does the author show Mary growing braver over the course of the story? Cite specific evidence from the text to support your claim.
5. Mary's experiences in the story are very exciting to her and contain much physical action. How does the author's use of onomatopoeia contribute to the story's visceral nature? (Cite specific places in the text to support your answer).
6. Does the illustration effectively convey the tone and mood of the story?

## Writing Exercise Options

### Narrative

Reread the story. Now assume the role of a serious journalist who has gone to interview Mrs. McKay and write an article about her and the work she does on her estate. Consider how you would want to present Mrs. McKay to the public at large. How would you describe her property, her appearance, her personality, her work with the animals, the kids who work with her, etc.? Write an article that would appear in a local newspaper or in an online news journal.

### Descriptive

Sometimes, stereotypes and rumors have some tiny kernel of truth, which dates way back to their origins and gets twisted over time. What are the truths about Mrs. McKay, and how did they transform into the neighbors' rumors about her? Trace the information about Mrs. McKay from truth to rumor. Write a short story that explains how the legend (her reputation as a witch) developed. Pretend you are one of the local kids telling the story about Mrs. McKay.

### Analysis

What is the most significant lesson that Mary learned from her experience on Mrs. McKay's property that day? How did Mary mature? Cite the text to support your answer.

## Complementary Reading Text Option

### Writing Exercise

Simultaneously read and listen to the audio version of Chapter One of James Herriot's *All Creatures Great and Small*.

Audio: <http://bit.ly/2dhpM2W>

Written: <https://www.goodreads.com/reader/53572-all-creatures-great-and-small>

In a one- to two-page comparison paper (or a longer essay), answer the following question using thoughtfully chosen quotes from each text to illustrate and support your answer.

Question: How do both authors create a sense of wonder and joy in their protagonists, despite both stories taking place against backdrops of dirty hard work and grimy environments that involve animals and animal messes?

## Activity Options

### Classroom Activity One

Work in small teams to create a three- to five-minute original scene for the characters based on the facts established in the story. Brainstorm, write a script, and cast your teammates as the characters—then rehearse. Perform this scene for your class, or invite another class to be the audience as your class performs all its scenes.

Teacher's Note: The scenes may later be woven together into a one-act play based on the characters.

### Classroom Activity Two

Write, film, and edit a short version of your scene. (Alternately, you may write and film a documentary about Mrs. McKay and her estate). Aim for your short-film production to be approximately two- to four- minutes long. Students can use their cellphones to capture footage and edit using any free software they may already have access to at home or school or use a Linux-based free program online.

Teacher's Note: For the two activities above, it may be helpful for students to review their Universal Themes Pre-Reading Activity about the most important and common aspects of com-



ing-of-age experiences. They can use those main points to help guide the plot and focus of their scenes and films.

## Home Activity

Using the story's descriptions and facts about Mrs. McKay, create a LinkedIn page, a professional résumé, or a webpage in which you advertise a student-internship program working with animals and explain her professional services. How would you explain what she does, highlight her strengths, and leverage her eccentricities to help her find work or get students interested in working on her property?

## Guest Speaker

1. Invite author Mary Lea Carroll to come to class to speak about her life growing up in the distinctive community of Altadena, located in the greater Pasadena and San Gabriel Valley area. Ask her how she thinks growing up in the 1950s might be different than growing up today? What does she think students today may be missing? Conversely, what does she think may be some advantages of growing up today rather than back then?
2. Invite visual artist Tony Wong to come to the class and discuss his artistic technique. How did he decide to approach illustrating the topic of a dead pony? You may ask him why he chose watercolor for this piece and if he works primarily in watercolors. Watercolor is a dynamic medium of visual art because, while one is working, it moves more than oil, tempera, or other paint types. Invite Wong to demonstrate some watercolor techniques live in class. If time permits, students may create their own paintings of what they imagine the animals on the estate to look like, of Mrs. McKay, or of her estate.
3. Invite an animal handler or wrangler from the entertainment industry to speak with the class about the current rules and guidelines for animal safety on set. How does this contrast with the absence of rules in the 1950s? Ask about the differences between county, state, and federal laws for keeping animals. Are there any laws in LA regarding keeping animals?

Teacher's Note: Ask the handler to bring an animal to class and demonstrate the correct ways to approach and interact with animals and ask them to do tasks.

## Field Trip

Take a tour of Pasadena and Altadena and all points mentioned in the story: John Muir High School, Pasadena High School, and the historic housing districts of Altadena and Pasadena. Include stops at Eaton Canyon, Pasadena City Hall, Pasadena Museum of History, and The Huntington Library, Art Collection, and Botanical Gardens. (Contact Marissa Kuchek at The Huntington for educational tours).

As you visit various locations on the tour, take notes, photos, and perhaps short cellphone videos on points of interest. (If not everyone has a Smartphone, students may work in small teams). Use these memories to create an illustrated slideshow or printed-book-version of Mary's memoir to share with the class.

Principal Timothy Sippel of JMHS is an extraordinarily kind administrator, who might be able to arrange a small tour to show the Muir Ranch farm project to student-visitors. In the program, students plant, grow, and tend to their own crops on the school's campus. Students sell their produce at farmers' markets, cook, and from time to time hold restaurant-quality dinners, which are open to the public.

Teacher's Note: If an actual field trip to Altadena is not possible, students may conduct a virtual tour researching photos, news articles, and videos of the area from the 1950s.

## **SUPPLEMENTARY CURRICULUM FOR TEST PREPARATION**

### **Story**

*Mrs. McKay and the Dead Pony*, by Mary Lea Carroll

### **Timed Writing Exercise**

Five years after beginning work on Mrs. McKay's farm, the speaker decides to write a college application essay on the experience of burying a dead pony. Assuming the speaker's perspective, write a 350-word narrative essay describing the challenge and the lesson learned from burying the pony.

### **Online Component**

Before the next class meeting, ask students to post their essay on the class website or turn in the essay on Turnitin.com.

If handwriting your essay, please use the box below:

### **Pre-Editing Activity**

Students exchange digital or hard-copy essays.

### **Editing Activity**

At your peer tutoring job, a student asks you for feedback on this college application essay. Focus on the student's use of textual evidence to support their analysis. Focus on the writer's syntax, diction, and telling words. Does language convey a vivid picture of the experience of burying the pony and the lesson learned?

Write a brief, professional email to the student discussing areas in which the essay needs revision. Be sure to address the response's overall strengths, as well as one area in which the writer could improve.

### **Core Standards**

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.6: Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

## COMMON CORE STANDARDS REFERENCE

### Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

### Vocabulary Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.5 Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4.C Consult general and specialized reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation of a word or determine or clarify its precise meaning, its part of speech, or its etymology.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4.D Verify the preliminary determination of the meaning of a word or phrase (e.g., by checking the inferred meaning in context or in a dictionary).

### Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.C Pose and respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.D Review the key ideas expressed and demonstrate understanding of multiple perspectives through reflection and paraphrasing.

## Text-Dependent Question Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1 Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

## Writing Exercise Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

## Complementary Reading Text Writing Exercise

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.7 Compare and contrast the experience of reading a story, drama, or poem to listening to or viewing an audio, video, or live version of the text, including contrasting what they “see” and “hear” when reading the text to what they perceive when they listen or watch.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9 Compare and contrast texts in different forms or genres (e.g., stories and poems; historical novels and fantasy stories) in terms of their approaches to similar themes and topics.

## Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1–3 above.)