

## Extra info on Holes

*Holes* is [Louis Sachar](#)'s fifth novel, and probably his most loved. The novel took Sachar a year and a half to write, and was published in 1998. *Holes* combined huge popular appeal with critical success, as *Holes* won or was nominated for almost twenty different awards, including the National Book Award (1998) and a Newbery Medal (1999). In 2012, *Holes* was voted the sixth best children's chapter book of all time by the *School Library Journal*. A movie of the book, for which Sachar wrote the screenplay, was produced in 2003 by Walt Disney Pictures. [Small Steps](#), which is not a direct sequel but follows the post-Camp Green Lake lives of some of *Holes*' minor characters, was published in 2006. On the subject of the book's genre, scholar Laura Nicosia writes that *Holes* has been classified at different times as "realistic, a tall tale, a folk tale, a fairy tale, a children's story, a postmodern novel, a detective fiction and an historical legend" - quite a list for what appears on the surface to be a relatively simple book for kids to read and enjoy. Although it is frequently taught in middle and high school, *Holes* has also been the subject of serious critical attention, particularly from scholars interested in its portrayal of the past and its postmodern, complex narrative style.

<https://www.gradesaver.com/holes>

## Historical Context of *Holes*

**When Elya Yelnats immigrated to the United States, presumably in the mid-late 1800s, he was ahead of the curve—Latvian immigration to the United States didn't truly pick up until 1888, and a second wave of immigration took place in 1905. The events in Green Lake are deeply influenced by America's history of slavery, racism, and the racial animosity that persisted in the Reconstruction-era South. During the 1880s, when Sam is killed for kissing Miss Katherine, Texas was still deeply segregated. The state, along with much of the American south, enforced laws prohibiting marriage, sex, and cohabitation between interracial couples. This practice was ruled unconstitutional in the 1967 Supreme Court Case *Loving v. Virginia*. While it's unclear if Stanley was tried as an adult or a child for the theft of Clyde Livingston's shoes, at age fourteen, Stanley's case could've gone either way. However, because of the value of the shoes (\$5000), it's likely he was tried as an adult. Trying children and teens as adults often results in harsher sentences, which 18 months at Camp Green Lake arguably was. In the United States, there are few protections available to children and teens when facing the justice system, and in some states, it's legal to try children as young as eight as adults.**

- **Genre: Children's/Young Adult Fiction; Adventure Novel**

**<https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes>**

## Fate and Destiny Theme Analysis

### Themes

*Holes* follows fourteen-year-old **Stanley Yelnats**, a boy wrongly accused of stealing a pair of shoes, as he's sent to Camp Green Lake in the Texas desert to serve his sentence. For generations, Stanley's family has been haunted by the specter of Stanley's "no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather." That great-great grandfather, **Elya Yelnats**, didn't follow through on a bargain he struck with a "gypsy" woman, **Madame Zeroni**, and the Yelnats family has been plagued by bad luck ever since. Opinion varies among the Yelnats family members as to whether this is due to a real curse put on the family by Madame Zeroni or a simple case of constant bad luck, but the narrator is quick to point out instances in which things seem far too serendipitous to be the work of mere chance. With this, *Holes* presents a world in which there's a very real chance that fate is at work, even if it's never possible for the characters to ever know for sure. In this way, Sachar is able to use fate and destiny as devices to make the plot of the novel feel especially dramatic, ordered, and satisfying.

It's worth noting that, at least according to what they say, none of the Yelnats family truly believes in the curse—even Elya. The narrator states that when Elya realized he broke his promise to Madame Zeroni, he was only fifteen

and instead of worrying about his family being cursed for generations, he was simply sad that he'd broken a promise to his friend. Over the next several generations (Stanley the protagonist is the fourth Stanley Yelnats; **the first Stanley** was Elya's son), the Yelnats family is plagued by bad luck. Most notable is the first Stanley, who surprisingly did make his fortune on the east coast and then headed west with a valuable suitcase. In Texas, his stagecoach was attacked by the outlaw **Kissin' Kate Barlow**, who stole his suitcase. He survived for seventeen days in the desert, married a nurse at the hospital where he was treated, and the Yelnats family has been in Texas ever since. Notably, Kate's story is also one in which fate factors dramatically. Before she was Kissin' Kate Barlow, she was Miss Katherine, the beloved schoolteacher of the idyllic Texas town of Green Lake. When she fell in love with **Sam**, an African-American onion seller, his murder by the wealthy white man **Trout Walker** propelled Kate into a life of banditry and put a curse of sorts on Green Lake: the narrator states that since Sam's death, 110 years before the present, not a drop of rain has fallen in the area.

Though Stanley's time at Camp Green Lake is horrific and makes little sense to him, his transformation over the course of the novel very much mirrors the transformation that young Elya went through as he entered into his agreement with Madame Zeroni. In order to win over his love, **Myra Menke**, Elya was to carry a piglet up the mountain every day to drink from a magical stream and sing it a special lullaby. This would both make him extremely strong and help his pig grow bigger than that

of **Igor Barkov**, his rival for Myra's affection. On the final day, Elya was supposed to carry the pig up the hill and then carry Madame Zeroni herself to the stream. Stanley, on the other hand, digs holes five feet wide and five feet deep every day for about the same amount of time that Elya carried his pig up the mountain. At what comes to be the end of Stanley's sentence, he runs away into the desert after his friend, Hector "Zero" Zeroni. Zero becomes extremely ill and dehydrated after several days in the desert, leading Stanley to carry Zero up a mountain to where they believe there's water. Unbeknownst to both boys, Zero is actually the great-great-great grandson of Madame Zeroni—and after Stanley carries Zero up the mountain and sings him the special lullaby, it appears to break the curse. **Stanley's dad** promptly experiences a breakthrough in his formula to cure foot odor and, because of this, he is finally able to hire a lawyer to prove Stanley's innocence. **Ms. Morengo** isn't just able to clear Stanley, but is able to also take temporary custody of Zero and shut down Camp Green Lake. This in particular suggests that Stanley's actions also did something to atone for Sam's murder, as the Warden is Trout Walker's descendent—and following Stanley's release, rain finally falls on the lake again.

Though the characters remain seemingly unconvinced of the actual existence of the curse, the ways in which Stanley's completion of his great-great grandfather's task appears to set things right for the family suggests that fate and destiny clearly exist and hold sway in Stanley's world. In the end, it seems to matter less whether or not

**the Yelnats family truly believes or not in fate or curses—the success and relief that Stanley's family feels in the epilogue suggests that, even if they don't fully believe in the curse, Stanley's actions still somehow freed them from ever needing to blame their misfortunes on Stanley's no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather.**

### **Cruelty vs. KindnessTheme Analysis**

**Camp Green Lake is an impossibly cruel place. There, the Warden forces teenage inmates to dig holes five feet wide and five feet deep, seemingly for no reason other than to "build character." In addition to this backbreaking labor, the adults in charge, who are ironically referred to as counselors, also work hard to terrify the inmates and destroy their senses of self-worth—and in turn, they foster an environment in which cruelty and terror are valuable currency, while kindness is a joke when it exists at all. In this environment Stanley's kindnesses to his fellow Group D members, and specifically to [Zero](#), stand in sharp contrast to the way the rest of the camp functions. Through the relationship between Stanley and Zero, *Holes* explores the truly transformative power of kindness, as well as the dehumanizing effects of cruelty, ultimately suggesting that kindness and friendship in particular can help to remedy some of the effects of cruel mistreatment.**

**Stanley is described as being a "good kid," and his actions and outlook on life are surprisingly generous given the circumstances. He's arrested because he's just "in the wrong place at the wrong time," but he's also trying to do something nice for his dad by bringing him the smelly pair of shoes that mysteriously fell from the sky (Stanley's dad is in the process of figuring out how to recycle old sneakers, and Stanley feels instinctively that the shoes will be the key to his dad's success). Stanley simply has no idea the shoes were stolen. Immediately upon arrival at Camp Green Lake, however, Stanley learns that his kindness and generosity aren't going to get him far in the cutthroat social structure of Group D or the camp at large. Mr. Sir, the cantankerous middle manager of Camp Green Lake, handles Stanley's intake and promptly reminds him that "this isn't a Girl Scout camp," a phrase that he repeats in some form nearly every time he speaks. Coupled with the fact that Mr. Sir is easily the nastiest adult in charge, second only to the Warden, his constant refrain about the Girl Scouts sets up the idea that the things and ideas that he considers embarrassingly feminine—in this case, things like kindness, empathy, or care for others—don't exist at Camp Green Lake, the goal is to be as toxically masculine and as cruel as possible, just like he is.**

**Mr. Sir and the Warden's insistence on cruelty filters down to the campers, which in turn keeps the campers from forming meaningful connections with each other, truly caring about others' fates, or being at all willing to help each other. Of the boys in Group D, Stanley seems**

relatively unique in that he clearly recognizes that the social hierarchy of Group D is based on terror and power, not camaraderie. Thus, Stanley "moves up one spot in line" for water only when he caves to X-Ray's intimidation, while any attempts he makes to express care or interest in his peers' wellbeing are met with explosive anger. The only person that this doesn't hold true for is Zero, who is spoken to with unmatched cruelty by both his peers and adults, even the relatively kind [Mr. Pendanski](#). The fact that Zero and Stanley are able to form a friendship suggests that Zero, like Stanley, doesn't necessarily buy into the idea that behaving cruelly is the only way to get ahead in the world. Indeed, Zero doesn't participate in any of the group intimidation of Stanley and is the only camper who refuses to use Stanley's assigned nickname, Caveman. Zero's choice to instead be mostly solitary culminates in his decision to walk away from the camp altogether into the desert, a choice that suggests it's better to be alone than to live with the kind of cruelty that's commonplace at Camp Green Lake.

When Stanley decides to go after Zero, understanding that Zero has no chance of survival without water, he rebels dramatically by choosing kindness in a place where kindness is severely undervalued. The high degree of care that Stanley shows Zero while they wander in the desert, including carrying him up an impossibly steep mountain, finding him water, and feeding him onions, allows Stanley and Zero to become close to each other and become true friends. Stanley's kindness to Zero even allows him to break the curse that [Madame Zeroni](#), a distant



grandmother of Zero's, put on [Elya Yelnats](#), Stanley's great-great grandfather. Finally, the lake's subsequent transformation into a real lake—and the fact that Camp Green Lake becomes a real Girl Scout camp after the Warden's operation is shut down—illustrates clearly that harmony among nature and people rests on kindness, while cruelty has the power to destroy both.

### Justice Theme Analysis

*Holes* explores the complexity of justice, both in terms of formal justice systems like courts of law, and more personal justice systems, such as the banditry and vigilante justice of the outlaw [Kissin' Kate Barlow](#) in the late 1800s. By exploring the ways in which the formal justice system falls short and doesn't actually promote justice, both in the present and in the past, *Holes* questions the usefulness of formal systems of justice in the first place. At the same time, it also questions the role of both vigilante justice and justice that appears to come from fate, destiny, or possibly God. Ultimately, the novel suggests that it takes all three methods to properly uphold justice, while also suggesting that everyone will eventually receive the justice they deserve—though it may come through mysterious means.

From the beginning, the reader is led to believe that the formal justice system is ineffective at best. The narrator explains up-front that **Stanley** didn't steal the famous baseball player Clive Livingston's shoes from the homeless shelter, where they were supposed to be auctioned to raise money. Regardless, Stanley is convicted and sent to Camp Green Lake, which is sold to him as an option superior to going to prison. Stanley then arrives at Camp Green Lake and becomes aware of just how dysfunctional and cruel the camp truly is. While Camp Green Lake is technically part of the formal Texas justice system, in reality, it exists in a separate realm altogether from the justice system. This is reinforced and magnified by the fact that it soon becomes clear that the teenage inmates aren't actually there just to "build character" by digging holes; Stanley realizes after a few weeks that the Warden is looking for something buried in the lake and is using the inmates as cheap labor to help her find it. This shows clearly just how corrupt and ineffective the formal justice system is, as it doesn't seem like the state particularly cares about the injustices that go on at Camp Green Lake.

When the novel goes back in time to tell the history of Green Lake, it quickly becomes clear that Camp Green Lake is barren and horrific in the present as punishment for an instance in which justice was *not* served in the 1880s. When Miss Katherine, the beloved schoolteacher, first rejected the advances of the wealthy **Trout Walker** and then fell in love with the black onion seller **Sam**, the idyllic town dissolved into race-driven

**violence. The town of Green Lake had outlawed interracial relationships, and thus Katherine and Sam's kiss sparked a riot that resulted in Trout Walker shooting Sam in the middle of the lake as he tried to escape with Katherine, and then rescuing Katherine "against her will." Prior to her attempt to escape with Sam, Katherine approached the sheriff for help when the mob began to torch the schoolhouse. The sheriff not only refused to put a stop to the violence, but presumably went on to condone Trout Walker's actions. He also suggested that God would punish Kate for kissing Sam, given that her participation in the kiss wasn't illegal, it was just considered morally wrong in the racist world of the 1880s. This illustrates how the formal justice system in Green Lake has been corrupt for more than a century—as the sheriff's cruelty continues to be perpetuated by the Warden in the present. Then, after describing what happened to Sam, the narrator notes that "not one drop of rain has fallen on Green Lake" since Sam was murdered, 110 years ago. The narrator even asks the reader to decide whom God punished. In this way, the novel encourages the reader to see the horror of Camp Green Lake as divine punishment for the morally repugnant actions of the sheriff and Trout Walker, whose descendent is none other than the Warden.**

**When Katherine kills the sheriff, she also seeks to do her part to atone for Sam's death. The fact that she dies laughing twenty years later at the hands of Trout Walker and his wife when they come for her treasure suggests that she very literally got the last laugh—the Walker family continues to pay for their racism and greed for**

generations, even after the novel ends (the Warden is forced to sell Camp Green Lake after the Texas **attorney general** shuts it down). With this, the novel makes it clear that everyone will eventually receive justice, even if justice comes on its own timeline and from outside the formal justice system.

### **Power, Money, and Education Theme Analysis**

At its heart, *Holes* is a study of power dynamics. By considering the different ways that characters gain power, hold onto it, or are unable to do either, *Holes* questions the very nature of power and, specifically, the different ways that individuals are denied power due to poverty and a lack of education.

One of the first means of gaining power that the novel explores is through money. The Yelnats family is extremely poor, while **Zero** and **Zero's mother** lived in dire poverty until his mother disappeared, leaving Zero to live as an orphan on the streets. For both boys—and, indeed, their families as well—their economic standing is one of the main reasons why Stanley and Zero end up at Camp Green Lake in the first place. Stanley's family is unable to pay for a lawyer to defend Stanley, which puts him at the mercy of the criminal justice system that's more interested in convicting someone for stealing Clyde Livingston's shoes than discovering the truth of who did it.

**Stanley chooses to go to Camp Green Lake instead of prison because the judge pressures him into making a quick decision, which again illustrates how Stanley's lack of power in the courtroom relegated him to a horrendous fate: in the event that Stanley had lost his case even with the help of a lawyer, a lawyer still would've been aware that Camp Green Lake is no idyll and, at the very least, could've given Stanley more time to make an informed decision.**

**Zero is similarly victimized because his poverty forces him to petty theft in order to simply survive—he's arrested and sent to Camp Green Lake after stealing a pair of shoes from a shoe store, and he tells Stanley that he and his mother have always had to steal in order to eat. For Zero in particular, he believes that the only way to maintain power and control over his own life is to steal and hide from the authorities, as the government discovering that he's living as an orphan gives them the right to declare him a ward of the state—in other words, to take control over Zero's life.**

**Unlike Stanley or the other campers, Zero is victimized because of his lack of education; he's entirely illiterate when Stanley meets him. Stanley's opinion of Zero evolves relatively quickly—he very soon recognizes that Zero is exceptionally smart and worthy of consideration, regardless of whether or not he can read—but Zero's lack of education means that no one else at Camp Green Lake takes him seriously and he simultaneously has less power to stand up for himself. Though it's somewhat unclear if the other boys at camp are aware that Zero is illiterate,**

**they nonetheless view him as stupid, uneducated, and only good for digging holes, and they use this image of him to justify their own superiority and their bullying and poor treatment of Zero. The power of education comes to the forefront when, at the end of the novel, Zero has learned to read well enough to be able to read Stanley's name on the mysterious suitcase he and Stanley dig up. This allows Zero to effectively make the case to [Ms. Morengo](#) that the suitcase belongs to Stanley, not the Warden, finally gaining a degree of power over a person who has, for the entirety of the novel, held Zero's life in her hands.**

**Though the epilogue doesn't reference education specifically, Stanley and Zero both earn a small fortune from the contents of the first Stanley Yelnats's suitcase. With this money, Stanley is able to buy a house, and Zero—who chooses to go by his real name, Hector—is able to finally reunite with his mother. This happy ending implies that, even if money can't necessarily buy happiness, it does indeed have the power to make it easier for one to move through the world and support one's family, which the novel ultimately suggests is one way to get closer to true happiness.**

## **Man vs. Nature Theme Analysis**

**In all three settings of the novel (Latvia in the mid-1800s; Green Lake, Texas in the 1880s; and Camp Green Lake in**

the late 1990s), the natural world is afforded a great deal of power over its human inhabitants. For those who are willing to play by the natural world's rules, nature isn't something to be feared; rather, it's something that can bring happiness, good fortune, and even economic prosperity. For those who seek to dominate the land, and, in some cases, for those who do respect the land, the natural world strikes back with surprising force. In this way, *Holes* presents a version of nature in which nature is something sentient whose rules require respect and reverence.

The power of the natural world is first introduced in Elya Yelnats's story, when **Madame Zeroni** tells him that if he carries his piglet up the mountain daily to drink from a stream that runs uphill, it will grow big enough for him to win his beloved Myra's hand. It very quickly becomes clear that the stream has magical powers, as the runty piglet is exactly as big as Igor's pig on the day of Myra's birthday—but not bigger, as Elya didn't take the pig up the mountain that final day. The stream represents an unnatural yet benevolent side to nature, and it shows up again in Green Lake, Texas. **Sam** the onion man carefully guards the location where he grows his onions, but it later comes to light that the water there either runs uphill or comes from some other mysterious means. This in turn helps Sam market his onions, as well as the tinctures and lotions he makes with them, as a sort of miracle drug for all manner of maladies and ailments. Most notably, Sam makes an onion drink that repels the deadly yellow-spotted lizards that, at the time, lived only in the mountains. In particular,

when the knowledge that the lizards hate onions dies with Sam, it suggests that the ability to coexist with the natural world belongs only to those who treat it with respect and take its unnatural elements in stride, unlike Sam's killer **Trout Walker** and his descendent, the Warden.

When the narrator suggests that Green Lake dried up and became a desert to punish Trout Walker and the racist townsfolk who participated in the mob, it implies that nature in the world of *Holes* isn't just something that exists alongside humans. Rather, it's something sentient with a keen interest in the goings-on of its human inhabitants, as well as a sense of morality and judgment that is clearly not in line with that of Trout Walker and the sheriff. With the transformation of Green Lake into a desert, the yellow-spotted lizards also descend from the mountains to prey on any humans not quick enough to escape them. Though the novel suggests that this was a natural move for the lizards, which thrive in the dry desert sun, it's also possible to read this as another way in which the natural world punishes its inhabitants for misdeeds by making its desert even more dangerous.

**Stanley** clearly reads the land as sentient. He makes note of the rock formation he refers to as "**God's Thumb**," where **the first Stanley** supposedly survived for seventeen days after Kissin' Kate abandoned him in the desert. As Stanley and **Zero** make their way across the desert towards the mountains, they keep an eye on the formation and feel as though the land itself is giving them a thumbs-up to urge them on. When they finally arrive, Stanley and Zero find the land (which is implied to be Sam's onion



**field) truly life-giving: they're able to dig to find water, and the steady diet of onions that both boys eat for several days not only brings Zero back to some semblance of health—it keeps the boys safe when they find themselves in a nest of yellow-spotted lizards upon their return to Camp Green Lake.**

**Taken together, the end of the novel clearly reinforces the power of the natural world and its interest in human events: Stanley's act of carrying Zero up the hill, helping him drink, and singing him Madame Zeroni's lullaby appears to break the curse, while rains finally come to Green Lake and turn the lake into an actual lake again following the Warden's removal from the land. When the narrator explains that Camp Green Lake is slated to become an actual **Girl Scout** camp within a few years, it suggests that Green Lake itself is turning over a new leaf and will be presumably be managed by better stewards with the power to impart an appropriate sense of respect and reverence in the campers to come.**

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