

The Active Reader: Skills and Strategies

When you're scolded for not doing your homework, you probably can guess—or conclude—that it's not a good time to ask to go to a concert that evening. Drawing conclusions is a natural part of your daily life, even in your reading. Use the strategies on this page to help you draw conclusions about what you read.

Drawing Conclusions

Drawing conclusions is a special kind of inference that involves not reading *between* the lines but reading *beyond* the lines. You combine what you already know with information from the text. You can draw a conclusion from stated facts or facts you infer, and then combine all the facts to support your conclusion. Use the strategies below to help you draw conclusions about fiction. For each literary element, organize details in a chart like this one. Then draw conclusions based on that information.

Plot, Character, Setting, or Theme	Stated Facts	Inferred Facts

Conclusions: _____

1 Strategies for Drawing Conclusions About Plot

- Record important facts related to the plot. For example, in "To Build a Fire," you might record the fact that the man's feet get wet.
- Identify the conflict and the resolution of the conflict.
- **Question** how the climax impacts the outcome of the action.

2 Strategies for Drawing Conclusions About Character

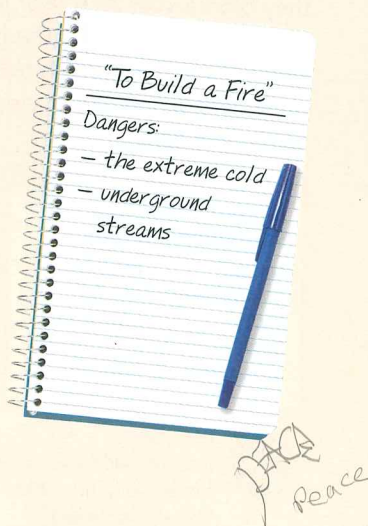
- Record important facts related to character. In "To Build a Fire," you might note that the man did not fully imagine the possible dangers of his situation.
- **Evaluate** a character's thoughts, motivations, and actions.
- Pay close attention to any comments about a character made by the narrator or other characters.

3 Strategies for Drawing Conclusions About Setting

- Record important facts related to setting. Look at the notebook at the right for one student's notes on setting in "To Build a Fire."
- Note how the setting affects the plot.

4 Strategies for Drawing Conclusions About Theme

- Record your ideas related to the theme of a story. For example, one theme for "To Build a Fire" might be the frailty of humans in the face of nature.
- Pay close attention to any messages the writer may be conveying about the human condition.



Need More Help?

Remember that active readers use the essential reading strategies explained on page 7: **visualize, predict, clarify, question, connect, evaluate, monitor.**

“Doodle was just about the craziest brother a boy ever had.”

The Scarlet Ibis

Short Story by JAMES HURST

Connect to Your Life

What People Expect Expectations are ideas about what a person is capable of doing or becoming. The narrator of this story has high expectations of his younger brother. Think about the expectations that others have of you. Do some people expect great things of you? Do you expect great things of yourself? For each of the following groups of people, assign a number from one to five, with five being the highest, to indicate the level of expectation they have for you: parents, siblings, friends, teachers and coaches, and yourself. Whose expectations are the highest?

Build Background

Southern Setting “The Scarlet Ibis” is set on a cotton farm in the South around the time of World War I—a setting much like the one in which the author, James Hurst, grew up. Hurst refers to a number of trees and flowers by the local names that he learned as a boy. For example, the “bleeding tree” is a type of pine from which white sap runs like blood when the bark is cut. “Graveyard flowers” are sweet-smelling gardenias, which, because they bloom year after year, are often planted in cemeteries. The frayed twigs of the “toothbrush tree” were once used by people to clean their teeth after eating.

WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

careen	infallibility
doggedness	invalid
exotic	iridescent
heresy	precariously
imminent	reiterate



LaserLinks:
Background for Reading
Historical Connection
Visual Vocabulary

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS THEME A **theme** is the central idea or message in a work of fiction. It is a perception about life or human nature that the writer shares with the reader. Remember that a theme is not the same as the subject of a story—for example, “love” or “jealousy.” A theme is an insight *about* the subject—a statement you might make, such as “Jealousy can be very destructive.”

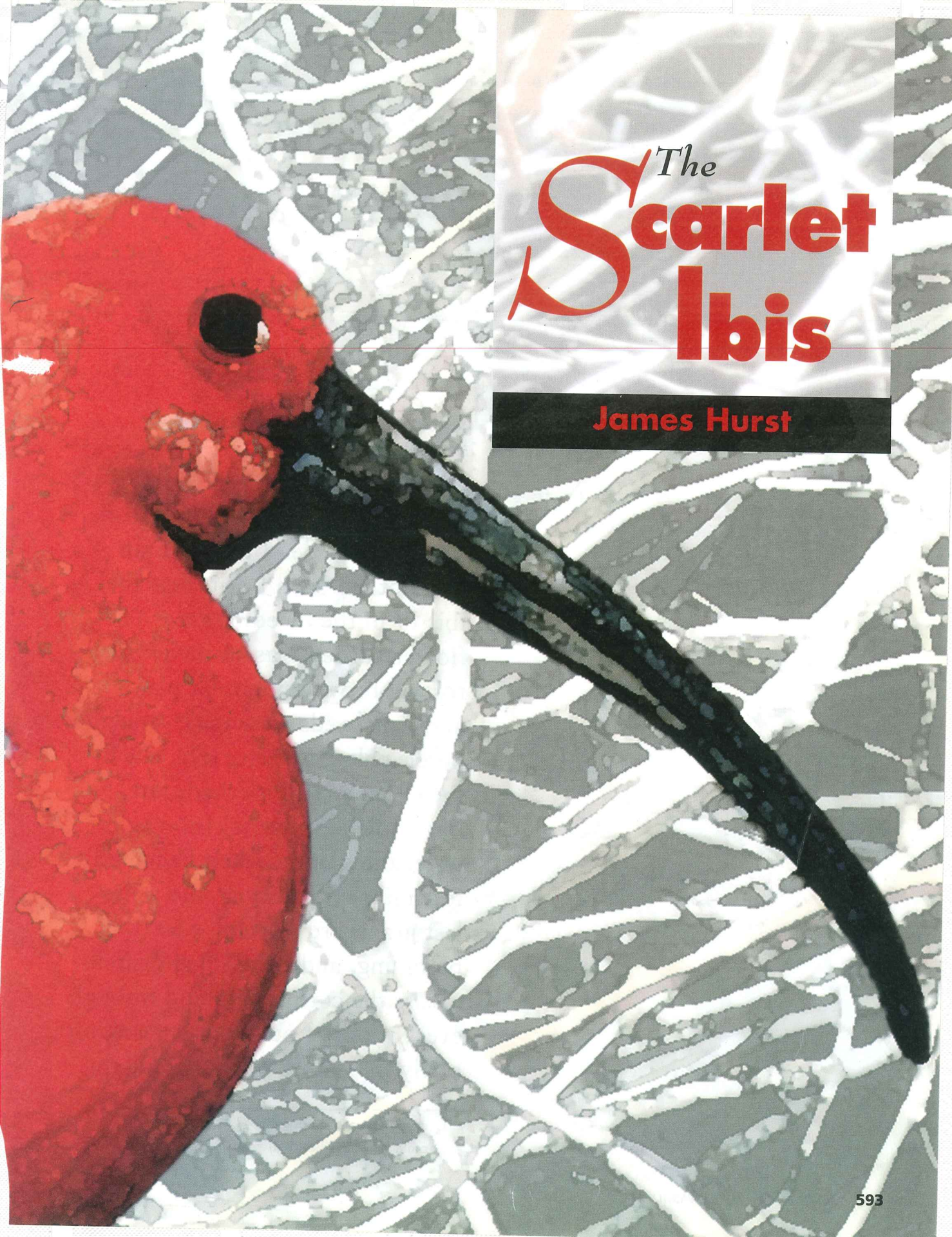
A story may have more than one theme. A good way to find a theme is to pay attention to the main character of a story. Does that person go through some sort of change? What does he or she learn? This might be an insight that the writer wants to share with the reader.

As you read “The Scarlet Ibis,” think about the experiences that the main characters go through and about what they come to realize by the end of the story.

ACTIVE READING DRAWING CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE NARRATOR

When you look at a number of details and make a logical guess about what they mean, you are making an **inference**. You might also combine inferences with what you already know and **draw a conclusion**. For example, if a friend shows up with torn clothes and a black eye, you infer he has met with some trouble. When you remember how angry he was at someone, you conclude he probably got into a fight. As an active reader of **fiction**, you constantly make inferences and conclusions about what the **characters** are doing or thinking and about what motivates them.

READER'S NOTEBOOK As you read this story, jot down two or three things you can infer about its **narrator**, as well as any conclusions you come to about him. This may help you discover a **theme**.



The
**Scarlet
Ibis**

James Hurst



It was in the clove¹ of seasons, summer was dead but autumn had not yet been born, that the ibis lit in the bleeding tree. The flower garden was stained with rotting brown magnolia petals and ironweeds grew rank² amid the purple phlox. The five o'clocks by the chimney still marked time, but the oriole nest in the elm was untenanted and rocked back and forth like an empty cradle. The last graveyard flowers were blooming, and their smell drifted across the cotton field and through every room of our house, speaking softly the names of our dead.

1. clove: a separation or split.

2. rank: growing wildly and vigorously.

It's strange that all this is still so clear to me, now that that summer has long since fled and time has had its way. A grindstone stands where the bleeding tree stood, just outside the kitchen door, and now if an oriole sings in the elm, its song seems to die up in the leaves, a silvery dust. The flower garden is prim, the house a gleaming white, and the pale fence across the yard stands straight and spruce. But sometimes (like right now), as I sit in the cool, green-draped parlor, the grindstone begins to turn, and time with all its changes is ground away—and I remember Doodle.

Doodle was just about the craziest brother a boy ever had. Of course, he wasn't a crazy crazy like old Miss Leedie, who was in love with President Wilson and wrote him a letter every day, but was a nice crazy, like someone you meet in your dreams. He was born when I was six and was, from the outset, a disappointment. He seemed all head, with a tiny body which was red and shriveled like an old man's. Everybody thought he was going to die—everybody except Aunt Nicey, who had delivered him. She said he would live because he was born in a caul,³ and cauls were made from Jesus' nightgown. Daddy had Mr. Heath, the carpenter, build a little mahogany coffin for him. But he didn't die, and when he was three months old, Mama and Daddy decided they might as well name him. They named him William Armstrong, which was like tying a big tail on a small kite. Such a name sounds good only on a tombstone.

I thought myself pretty smart at many things, like holding my breath, running, jumping, or climbing the vines in Old Woman Swamp, and I wanted more than anything else someone to race to Horsehead Landing, someone to box with, and someone to perch

with in the top fork of the great pine behind the barn, where across the fields and swamps you could see the sea. I wanted a brother. But Mama, crying, told me that even if William Armstrong lived, he would never do these things with me. He might not, she sobbed, even be "all there." He might, as long as he lived, lie on the rubber sheet in the center of the bed in the front bedroom where the white marquise curtains billowed out in the afternoon sea breeze, rustling like palmetto fronds.⁴

It was bad enough having an invalid brother, but having one who possibly was not all there was unbearable, so I began to make plans to kill him by smothering him with a pillow. However, one afternoon as I watched him, my head poked between the iron posts of the foot of the bed, he looked straight at me and grinned. I skipped through the rooms, down the echoing halls, shouting, "Mama, he smiled. He's all there! He's all there!" and he was.

When he was two, if you laid him on his stomach, he began to move himself, straining terribly. The doctor said that with his weak heart this strain would probably kill him, but it didn't. Trembling, he'd push himself up, turning first red, then a soft purple, and finally collapse back onto the bed like an old worn-out doll. I can still see Mama watching him, her hand pressed tight across her mouth, her eyes wide and unblinking. But he learned to crawl (it was his third winter), and we brought him out of the front bedroom, putting him on the rug before the fireplace. For the first time he became one of us.

3. **caul** (kôl): a thin membrane that covers the head of some babies at birth.

4. **palmetto fronds**: the fanlike leaves of a kind of palm tree.

As long as he lay all the time in bed, we called him William Armstrong, even though it was formal and sounded as if we were referring to one of our ancestors, but with his creeping around on the deerskin rug and beginning to talk, something had to be done about his name. It was I who renamed him. When he crawled, he crawled backward, as if he were in reverse and couldn't change gears. If you called him, he'd turn around as if he were going in the other direction, then he'd back right up to you to be picked up.

Crawling backward made him look like a doodlebug, so I began to call him Doodle, and in time even Mama and Daddy thought it was a better name than William Armstrong. Only Aunt Nicey disagreed. She said caul babies should be treated with special respect since they might turn out to be saints. Renaming my brother was perhaps the kindest thing I ever did for him, because nobody expects much from someone called Doodle.

Although Doodle learned to crawl, he showed no signs of walking, but he wasn't idle. He talked so much that we all quit listening to what he said. It was about this time that Daddy built him a go-cart and I had to pull him around. At first I just paraded him up and down the piazza,⁵ but then he started crying to be taken out into the yard, and it ended up by my having to lug him wherever I went. If I so much as picked up my cap, he'd start crying to go with me, and Mama would call from wherever she was, "Take Doodle with you."

He was a burden in many ways. The doctor had said that he mustn't get too excited, too hot, too cold, or too tired and that he must always be treated gently. A long list of don'ts went with him, all of which I ignored once we got out of the house. To discourage his coming with me, I'd run with him across the ends of the cotton rows and

careen him around corners on two wheels. Sometimes I accidentally turned him over, but he never told Mama. His skin was very sensitive, and he had to wear a big straw hat whenever he went out.

When the going got rough and he had to cling to the sides of the go-cart, the hat slipped all the way down over his ears. He was a sight. Finally, I could see I was licked.

Doodle was my brother and he was going to cling to me forever, no matter what I did, so I dragged him across the burning cotton field to share with him the only beauty I knew, Old Woman Swamp. I pulled the

go-cart through the sawtooth fern, down into the green dimness where the palmetto fronds whispered by the stream. I lifted him out and set him down in the soft rubber grass beside a tall pine. His eyes were round with wonder as he gazed about him, and his little hands began to stroke the rubber grass. Then he began to cry.

"For heaven's sake, what's the matter?" I asked, annoyed.

ACTIVE READING

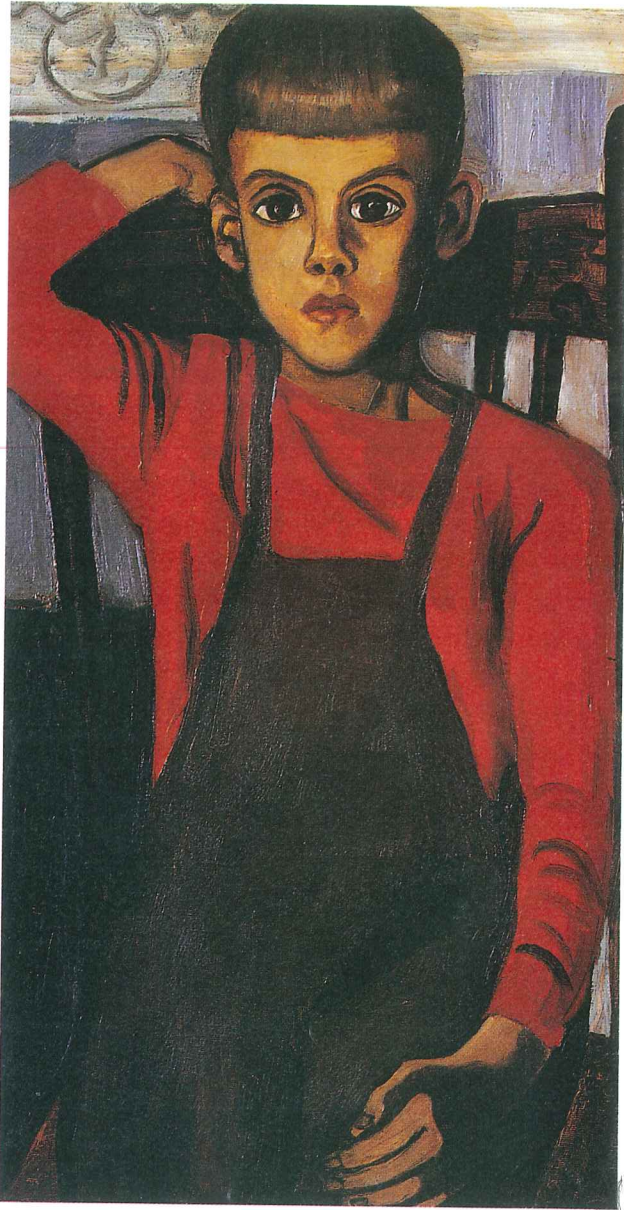
CONNECT As a child, how would you have felt about having to take a brother like Doodle with you everywhere?

...nobody expects much from someone called Doodle.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

careen (ke-rēn') v. to rush carelessly

5. piazza (pē-āz'ə): a large covered porch.



Richard at Age Five (1944), Alice Neel. Oil on canvas, 26" × 14", courtesy of Robert Miller Gallery, New York. Copyright © Estate of Alice Neel.

"It's so pretty," he said. "So pretty, pretty, pretty."

After that day Doodle and I often went down into Old Woman Swamp. I would gather wildflowers, wild violets, honeysuckle, yellow jasmine, snakeflowers, and water lilies, and with wire grass we'd weave them into necklaces and crowns. We'd bedeck ourselves with our handiwork and loll about thus beautified,

beyond the touch of the everyday world. Then when the slanted rays of the sun burned orange in the tops of the pines, we'd drop our jewels into the stream and watch them float away toward the sea.

There is within me (and with sadness I have watched it in others) a knot of cruelty borne by the stream of love, much as our blood sometimes bears the seed of our destruction, and at times I was mean to Doodle. One day I took him up to the barn loft and showed him his casket, telling him how we all had believed he would die. It was covered with a film of Paris green⁶ sprinkled to kill the rats, and screech owls had built a nest inside it.

Doodle studied the mahogany box for a long time, then said, "It's not mine."

"It is," I said. "And before I'll help you down from the loft, you're going to have to touch it."

"I won't touch it," he said sullenly.

"Then I'll leave you here by yourself," I threatened, and made as if I were going down.

Doodle was frightened of being left. "Don't go leave me, Brother," he cried, and he leaned toward the coffin. His hand, trembling, reached out, and when he touched the casket he screamed. A screech owl flapped out of the box into our faces, scaring us and covering us with Paris green.⁶ Doodle was paralyzed, so I put him on my shoulder and carried him down the ladder, and even when we were outside in the bright sunshine, he clung to me, crying, "Don't leave me. Don't leave me."

When Doodle was five years old, I was embarrassed at having a brother of that age who couldn't walk, so I set out to teach him. We were down in Old Woman Swamp and it was spring and the sick-sweet smell of bay flowers hung everywhere like a mournful song. "I'm going to teach you to walk, Doodle," I said.

6. Paris green: a poisonous green powder used to kill pests.

He was sitting comfortably on the soft grass, leaning back against the pine. “Why?” he asked.

I hadn’t expected such an answer. “So I won’t have to haul you around all the time.”

“I can’t walk, Brother,” he said.

“Who says so?” I demanded.

“Mama, the doctor—everybody.”

“Oh, you can walk,” I said, and I took him by the arms and stood him up. He collapsed onto the grass like a half-empty flour sack. It was as if he had no bones in his little legs.

“Don’t hurt me, Brother,” he warned.

“Shut up. I’m not going to hurt you. I’m going to teach you to walk.” I heaved him up again, and again he collapsed.

This time he did not lift his face up out of the rubber grass. “I just can’t do it. Let’s make honeysuckle wreaths.”

“Oh yes you can, Doodle,” I said. “All you got to do is try. Now come on,” and I hauled him up once more.

ACTIVE READING

PREDICT Do you think Doodle will be able to walk?

It seemed so hopeless from the beginning that it’s a miracle I didn’t give up. But all of us must have something or someone to be proud of, and Doodle had become mine. I did not know then that pride is a wonderful, terrible thing, a seed that bears two vines, life and death. Every day that summer we went to the pine beside the stream of Old Woman Swamp, and I put him on his feet at least a hundred times each afternoon. Occasionally I too became discouraged because it didn’t seem as if he was trying, and I would say, “Doodle, don’t you *want* to learn to walk?”

He’d nod his head, and I’d say, “Well, if you don’t keep trying, you’ll never learn.” Then I’d paint for him a picture of us as old men, white-haired, him with a long white beard and me still pulling him around in the go-cart. This never failed to make him try again.

Finally one day, after many weeks of

practicing, he stood alone for a few seconds. When he fell, I grabbed him in my arms and hugged him, our laughter pealing through the swamp like a ringing bell. Now we knew it could be done. Hope no longer hid in the dark palmetto thicket but perched like a cardinal in the lacy toothbrush tree, brilliantly visible.

“Yes, yes,” I cried, and he cried it too, and the grass beneath us was soft and the smell of the swamp was sweet.

With success so imminent, we decided not to tell anyone until he could actually walk. Each day, barring rain, we sneaked into Old Woman Swamp, and by cotton-picking time Doodle was ready to show what he could do. He still wasn’t able to walk far, but we could wait no longer. Keeping a nice secret is very hard to do, like holding your breath. We chose to reveal all on October eighth, Doodle’s sixth birthday, and for weeks ahead we mooned around the house, promising everybody a most spectacular surprise. Aunt Nicey said that, after so much talk, if we produced anything less tremendous than the Resurrection,⁷ she was going to be disappointed.

At breakfast on our chosen day, when Mama, Daddy, and Aunt Nicey were in the dining room, I brought Doodle to the door in the go-cart just as usual and had them turn their backs, making them cross their hearts and hope to die if they peeked. I helped Doodle up, and when he was standing alone I let them look. There wasn’t a sound as Doodle walked slowly across the room and sat down at his place at the table. Then Mama began to cry and ran over to him, hugging him and kissing him. Daddy hugged him too, so I went to Aunt Nicey, who was thanks praying in

7. the Resurrection: the rising of Jesus Christ from the dead after his burial.

WORDS
TO
KNOW
imminent (ɪm'ə-nənt) *adj.* about to occur