



Tree/House Questions, Answers, and Themes for Book Clubs

Or, everything you've always wanted to know about *Tree/House*.

SPOILER ALERT: If you haven't finished *Tree/House*, this guide may confuse you, and will take all the surprise out of reading.

This discussion is based on questions the Literary Divas of St. Helens, Oregon, sent to the author.

Is *Tree/House* unfinished?

Short answer: No. It's done.

Long answer: The story, Emma's awakening, is complete. Emma's further adventures are extraneous to that main story. They are for the reader to decide. *Tree/House* is literary fiction, so it has some ambiguity, which may contribute to a feeling of lack of finality. I believe all the loose ends are tied up, but I welcome readers' comments about this matter and anything else that interests them.

Jungian Psychoanalysis as Interpretative Tool

The most important key to understanding *Tree/House* is the Jungian approach to literature exemplified by Clarissa Pinkola Estés in *Women Who Run With the Wolves*. I had read that book a year or two before writing *Tree/House* and it impacted me in a big way. In her book, CPE analyzes classic myths and fairy tales from a variety of cultures, using the characters as metaphors for different elements of a single person's psychological struggles. These personifications are known as archetypes. The archetype she keeps coming back to is the Wild Woman.

The Wild Woman, as I understand her, is a part of every woman (and possibly every man, too), that is creative, beautiful, and strong. She must be nurtured and honored or the woman's spirit will wither and even die. When a woman ignores the Wild Woman, she is sad, can't reach her full potential, and is likely to make bad decisions. The basic story of *Tree/House* is that Emma is lost in the world because she doesn't know how to honor her Wild Woman.

Franklin and the Bluebeard Tale

Bluebeard is an aristocrat who has been married several times to women who have all mysteriously vanished. When Bluebeard visits his neighbor and asks to marry one of his children, the girls are terrified. After hosting a wonderful banquet, he persuades the youngest to marry him, which she does, and she goes to live with him and her sister Anne in his rich and luxurious home.

Bluebeard announces that he must leave the country and gives the keys of the château to his wife. She is able to open any door in the house with them, which each contain his riches, except for a room that she is never to enter. He then goes away and leaves the house and the keys in her hands. Immediately, she is overcome with the desire to see what the forbidden room holds, and, despite warnings from one of her sisters, she ventures into the room.

She immediately discovers the room is filled with blood and the corpses of his missing wives. Horrified, she drops the key and flees the room. She reveals her husband's secret to her sister, and they plan to both flee the next morning, but Bluebeard unexpectedly comes back and finds the bloody key. In a blind rage, he threatens to kill her on the spot, but she asks for one last prayer with her sister Anne. At the last moment, as Bluebeard is about to deliver the fatal blow, the brothers of the wife and her sister Anne arrive and kill Bluebeard. The wife inherits his fortune and castle, and has the dead wives buried. She uses the fortune to have her other siblings married, and eventually remarries herself and forgets about her horrible experience with Bluebeard. —Summary from Wikipedia.com

Think about the ways Franklin matches the Bluebeard archetype. They both have become unattractive and avoided by women, and both possess the knowledge of how to manipulate weak women, “convincing” them to marry him. They both leave a trail of carnage, although in Franklin's case, it's not literal. The students he used before Emma have scars on the inside. Franklin and Bluebeard both have money and estates, and they both leave their wives unattended and lonely. Emma attaches herself to him because she believes he is her only option... because she is feeling lost and uncreative, having abandoned the only thing she's ever shown any interest in (becoming a teacher).

Isolation

Franklin isn't the only villain. Emma also defeats herself, making poor decisions that result in increasing isolation. At first, she lives somewhere far away from her chosen university, and feels the mailbox is her only connection to the outside world. When Franklin is the only person who reaches out to her in this, the only way she understands, she feels she has little choice other than to do whatever he asks, even though she's never fully convinced of the picture Franklin paints for her. At the university, Emma isolates herself from her friends by becoming preoccupied with her Shakespeare class, the very class that saps her energy and stifles her creativity. The estate, a metaphor for prison, is far away from everything Emma has ever known before. In the midst of all this psychological turmoil, Emma even becomes passive enough not to renew her driver's license, further condemning herself to rely on

Franklin and the world he's set up for her. Are there other images of isolation in Emma's life?

Is Franklin's daughter really a ghost? Why does she appear to Emma in this fashion?

The book opens with a funeral to call attention to the central theme of death as a new beginning. Poor Cordelia the cat had to die in order to support this theme. Emma's dream, in which she's rotting and trying so hard to die, rounds out the metaphor. Franklin's daughter, who delivers the final truths that save Emma from perpetual isolation and boredom, appears to be a ghost first of all in order to be a more convincing doppelganger for Emma. Secondly, her ghostliness represents the soul in transition, from the death of the estate to the new life Emma must make for herself. Otherwise, she's a living, breathing woman who has made a good life for herself by leaving Franklin's abusive ways in the past.

Why does the house disintegrate?

The house is symbolic of everything that's kept Emma stagnant. In order to get on with her life, the boxy grey house has to fall apart. The house also represents the human-made world as a negative image in contrast with the natural world, so it's fitting that the natural world is the main actor in the house's demise. We see the natural/man-made contrast especially in Emma's weakly expressed preference for a wild forest and Franklin's conversion of the property into manicured lawns. This is where the title *Tree/House* comes into play, inviting direct contrast between the two elements with the slash.

Why does Geraldine insist on sleeping in the tree?

Geraldine is the embodiment of Emma's Wild Woman. Geraldine does what she wants and insists on being heard. She also has a lot of survival skills, as all truly Wild Women do. She represents the brothers of Bluebeard's wife, who save their sister. Geraldine prefers the natural world in general because she understands it at a deep level. The trees represent what is still wild on the estate (and in Emma's psyche) in contrast to the sterile, stifling house. Emma's freedom depends on her being able to "domesticate" Geraldine in a way that still allows Geraldine to flourish, so Geraldine can't sleep in the house in a conventional way until it's mostly destroyed and available for her to remake to her liking. I chose Geraldine's name because it's the feminine form of the Anglo-Saxon for "old spear." (Old = good in Anglo-Saxon.)

In the end, where is Emma going?

By the end of the book, Emma has all the information she needs to fully understand her situation and begin to remember how to be her own person, Wild Woman archetype included. In my interpretation, she returns to what made her happy so long before, teaching.

In the first draft, I actually showed her headed to Mexico to teach English with Viola (freshly broken out of jail) in the back seat. It was superfluous to the main message, so I took it out.

Who is the girl at the door and why does she remind Emma of the sponge?

Returning to the Bluebeard story, Viola takes on the role of the magic key. Franklin would rather keep his history with his students a secret from Emma, but Viola bursts into Emma's life unbidden in order to call attention to Franklin's room full of blood and bodies, i.e., how oppressive he really is, and to get Emma to think about that ominous pink kitchen sponge (also a magic key, or a red flag). If Emma could only pay attention to what's happening around her, she would never get herself into such a mess in the first place. I only suggest it in the book, but if the author's opinion counts, Viola is the one who kills Franklin. That's how upset she is about what he does with that sponge. Franklin's murder finally forces the chain of events that liberate Emma. In that way, Viola represents righteous outrage and stands in for one of the brothers who save Bluebeard's wife. Viola gets her name from a Shakespeare character who crosses boundaries, too, but it also consists of the first letters of "violate."

What is the significance of the pink kitchen sponge?

I first put that element in the book to arouse the reader's curiosity, to get him/her thinking and become a more active reader. I knew it was something sinister, but didn't assign any specific meaning to it until I first published *Tree/House* in paperback. At that time, I got some feedback from my friends about what it could be. The only response I remember, because it's the only one supported by the book, came from my best friend, who normally doesn't go this far into the gutter: Franklin uses the sponge, which he cleans and dampens on a regular basis, to wash his sinister fingers after they've performed unspeakable acts on his female students. He performs the same acts with Emma after they're married, but he doesn't need a sponge any longer because they're at home and he's got a sink, soap, and towels. I was scandalized when my friend first proposed this to me, but now I'm convinced it's the best, most viable interpretation so far. I would love to hear other interpretations from readers! The question is still open.

Tree/House is also available in audiobook and in Spanish as *Un hogar en los árboles*.

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