

Build Background

Every year in the United States, millions of dogs are abandoned or born in the wild, without homes. This is a fictional account of one such puppy.

Read with a Purpose Read this short story to find out what happens in a family when a stray dog appears one day.

STRAY



by **Cynthia Rylant**

In January, a puppy wandered onto the property of Mr. Amos Lacey and his wife, Mamie, and their daughter, Doris. Icicles hung three feet or more from the eaves of houses, snowdrifts swallowed up automobiles, and the birds were so fluffed up they looked comic.

The puppy had been abandoned, and it made its way down the road toward the Laceys' small house, its ears tucked, its tail between its legs, shivering.

Doris, whose school had been called off because of the snow, was out shoveling the cinder-block front steps when she spotted the pup on the road. She set down the shovel.

"Hey! Come on!" she called.

The puppy stopped in the road, wagging its tail timidly, trembling with shyness and cold.

Doris trudged through the yard, went up the shoveled drive and met the dog.

"Come on, pooch."

"Where did *that* come from?" Mrs. Lacey asked as soon as Doris put the dog down in the kitchen.

Mr. Lacey was at the table, cleaning his fingernails with his pocketknife. The snow was keeping him home from his job at the warehouse.

"I don't know where it came from," he said mildly, "but I know for sure where it's going."

Literary Focus

Theme The **theme** is the message about life that the author wants you to take from the story. Authors rarely state the theme directly. However, this sentence provides clues to help you start figuring out what the theme might be.

Reading Focus

Finding the Theme As you read, look for clues that can help you identify the theme. Jot down statements that seem important, including characters' dialogue. In this sentence, you can see that Mr. Lacey does not plan to keep the dog.



Analyzing Visuals

Viewing and Interpreting How does this photograph reflect Doris's feelings for the puppy?

Doris hugged the puppy hard against her. She said nothing.

Because the roads would be too bad for travel for many days, Mr. Lacey couldn't get out to take the puppy to the pound in the city right away. He agreed to let it sleep in the basement, while Mrs. Lacey grudgingly let Doris feed it table scraps. The woman was sensitive about throwing out food.

By the looks of it, Doris figured the puppy was about six months old and on its way to being a big dog. She thought it might have some shepherd in it.

Four days passed and the puppy did not complain. It never cried in the night or howled at the wind. It didn't tear up everything in the basement. It wouldn't even follow Doris up the basement steps unless it was invited.

It was a good dog.

Several times Doris had opened the door in the kitchen that led to the basement, and the puppy had been there, all stretched out, on the top step. Doris knew it had wanted some company and that it had lain against the door, listening to the talk in the kitchen, smelling the food, being a part of things. It always wagged its tail, eyes all sleepy, when she found it there.

Reading Focus

Finding the Theme As you look for clues to theme, also pay attention to statements by the narrator of a story. This description is about the dog, but notice that the dog is being described as though it were a person.

Even after a week had gone by, Doris didn't name the dog. She knew her parents wouldn't let her keep it, that her father made so little money any pets were out of the question, and that the pup would definitely go to the pound when the weather cleared.

Still, she tried talking to them about the dog at dinner one night.

"She's a good dog, isn't she?" Doris said, hoping one of them would agree with her.

Her parents glanced at each other and went on eating.

"She's not much trouble," Doris added. "I like her." She smiled at them, but they continued to ignore her.

"I figure she's real smart," Doris said to her mother. "I could teach her things."

Mrs. Lacey just shook her head and stuffed a forkful of sweet potato in her mouth. Doris fell silent, praying the weather would never clear.

But on Saturday, nine days after the dog had arrived, the sun was shining and the roads were plowed. Mr. Lacey opened up the trunk of his car and came into the house.

Doris was sitting alone in the living room, hugging a pillow and rocking back and forth on the edge of a chair. She was trying not to cry but she was not strong enough. Her face was wet and red, her eyes full of distress.

Mrs. Lacey looked into the room from the doorway.

"Mama," Doris said in a small voice. "Please."

Mrs. Lacey shook her head.

"You know we can't afford a dog, Doris. You try to act more grown-up about this."

Doris pressed her face into the pillow.

Outside, she heard the trunk of the car slam shut, one of the doors open and close, the old engine cough and choke and finally start up.

"Daddy," she whispered. "Please."

She heard the car travel down the road, and though it was early afternoon, she could do nothing but go to her bed. She cried herself to sleep, and her dreams were full of searching and searching for things lost.

Reading Focus

Cause and Effect A **cause** makes something happen; what happens is called an **effect**. The effect can in turn lead to the cause of something else that happens. The dog's arrival at the Lacey's house is the cause of a chain of events in the story. Notice the effect the dog has on Doris and her parents. There will be more cases of cause and effect that point to the theme of the story.



It was nearly night when she finally woke up. Lying there, like stone, still exhausted, she wondered if she would ever in her life have anything. She stared at the wall for a while.

But she started feeling hungry, and she knew she'd have to make herself get out of bed and eat some dinner. She wanted not to go into the kitchen, past the basement door. She wanted not to face her parents.

But she rose up heavily.

Her parents were sitting at the table, dinner over, drinking coffee. They looked at her when she came in, but she kept her head down. No one spoke.

Doris made herself a glass of powdered milk and drank it all down. Then she picked up a cold biscuit and started out of the room.

"You'd better feed that mutt before it dies of starvation," Mr. Lacey said.

Doris turned around.

"What?"

"I said, you'd better feed your dog. I figure it's looking for you."

Doris put her hand to her mouth.

"You didn't take her?" she asked.

"Oh, I took her all right," her father answered. "Worst-looking place I've ever seen. Ten dogs to a cage. Smell was enough to knock you down. And they give an animal six days to live. Then they kill it with some kind of a shot."

Analyzing Visuals

Viewing and Interpreting How do details of this photograph relate to the story's setting and conclusion?

Reading Focus

Finding the Theme Pay attention to related ideas and images that keep appearing in a story; they can be important clues to the theme. Consider how this statement echoes the earlier statement about how the dog wanted something, too.



Reading Model

Reading Focus

Making Generalizations From the way Mr. Lacey changes his mind, you might make a generalization about how even people who think they don't want a pet can end up caring about an animal. This generalization can help you understand the story's theme.

Doris stared at her father.

"I wouldn't leave an *ant* in that place," he said. "So I brought the dog back."

Mrs. Lacey was smiling at him and shaking her head as if she would never, ever, understand him.

Mr. Lacey sipped his coffee.

"Well," he said, "are you going to feed it or not?"

Read with a Purpose How does the dog affect the relationship between Doris and her parents? How does the dog bring out the best in everyone?

MEET THE WRITER

Cynthia Rylant

(1954–)

The Possibilities of Childhood

Cynthia Rylant spent part of her childhood with her grandparents in West Virginia. Remembering them fondly, she says:

"They lived life with strength . . . and a real sense of what it means to be devoted to and responsible for other people. The tone of my work reflects the way they spoke, the simplicity of their language, and, I hope, the depth of their own hearts."

Why does Rylant—winner of the Newbery medal and other awards—like to write?

"I like to show the way our lives are beautiful, breathtaking, in the smallest things. . . . I prefer writing about child characters because they have more possibilities. They can get away with more love, more anger, more fear than adult characters."

Think About the Writer Based on "Stray," how do you think Cynthia Rylant feels about children and pets?



Into Action: Making a Generalization to State the Theme

Use a table like the one below to make an observation about “Stray.” (*Hint: Try to decide what the main characters might have learned.*) Restate your observation as a generalization that applies to life.

Main Characters	Conflict/ Story Events	Observations
Amos, Mamie, and Doris Lacey		In the story: In life:

Talk About . . .

1. Explain to a partner your idea of the theme of “Stray.” Remember that readers may state a theme in different ways. Try to use each Academic Vocabulary word listed on the right at least once in your discussion.

Write About . . .

Answer the following questions about “Stray.” For definitions of the underlined Academic Vocabulary words, see the column on the right.

2. How does the author illustrate the cruelty of abandoning pets?
3. How does the dog communicate that it wants to belong to the family? How does Doris communicate her pain over losing the dog?
4. How does Mr. Lacey’s attitude toward the stray change after he visits the pound? Contrast Mr. Lacey’s attitude before he visits the pound with his attitude after he visits the pound.

Writing Focus

Think as a Reader/Writer

In Collection 4, you will read more stories with powerful themes. The Writing Focus activities will give you practice in developing characters and events that communicate truths about life.

Academic Vocabulary for Collection 4

Talking and Writing About Theme

Academic Vocabulary is the language you use to write and talk about literature. Use these words to discuss the stories you read in this collection. The words are underlined throughout the collection.

attitude (AT uh tood) *n.*: opinions and feelings you usually have about someone or something. *A character’s attitude may change and be a clue to theme.*

communicate (kuh MYOO nuh kayt) *v.*: express your thoughts or feelings clearly so that other people understand them. *Writers communicate lessons about life.*

contrast (KAHN trast) *v.*: note the differences between two people, situations, ideas, and so on that are being compared. *You can contrast the different themes you find in stories.*

illustrate (IHL uh strayt) *v.*: explain or make something clear by giving examples. *Use details from a story to illustrate your idea of its theme.*

Your Turn



Copy the Academic Vocabulary words into your *Reader/Writer Notebook*. Use each word in a sentence about another story you’ve read in this book.