***Holes***

***Critical Study:***

***Characters:***

***Stanley Yelnats IV***

Stanley Yelnats is the fourth of a long line of men named Stanley Yelnats, a name that is spelled the same backwards as it is forward. Stanley is an overweight, middle-school boy from a poor but loving family, who is teased and ridiculed by his classmates. As Stanley walks under an underpass, a pair of fancy tennis shoes drops down on him, and since Stanley knows this pair of shoes would be helpful to his dad, he takes them home, only to be accused of stealing them from a famous baseball player who had donated them to a charity auction. Stanley, innocent but without means to defend himself, takes the Court-appointed punishment of going to Camp Green Lake. Stanley's life at the camp and the relationships with the other boys, results in a stronger body, and, for the first time in his life, a true friendship with a boy named Zero.

Stanley works hard to avoid trouble, "makes the best of a bad situation," and in so doing, develops different kinds of relationships with each of the boys in Group D at camp. Stanley gains physical strength from digging, and uses his mental powers to figure out different approaches to problems. Stanley is steadfast and never gives up, always encouraging Zero at the worst times, and actually rescuing Zero from Camp because he is loyal to him and won't leave him there. The hard work and positive attitude that Stanley has contributes to the turn-around of the family's luck.

Stanley is the fourteen-year-old protagonist of the novel, who has been wrongfully imprisoned at a labor camp in Texas for stealing a famous athlete’s sneakers. Before his wrongful conviction, Stanley was an overweight and extremely unhappy boy who suffered severe bullying, although he tends to be kind to others despite the cruelty he has experienced. His family has been unlucky for generations, which he believes to be the fault of the Yelnats family curse (though he also insists he doesn't actually believe in the curse). At Camp Green Lake, Stanley is forced to dig a huge hole every day and report anything interesting he finds to the [Warden](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/the-warden). He does his best to keep to himself and is soon given the nickname Caveman due to his size. As everyone seems selfish, cruel, and power-hungry, Stanley tries to stay on the good side of those in power including [X-Ray](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/x-ray-rex), his unit’s de-facto leader, to whom Stanley promises to give anything interesting he finds. This results in Stanley handing X-Ray a gold lipstick tube belonging to the bandit [Kissin' Kate Barlow](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/miss-katherine-kissin-kate-barlow). Though Stanley remains interested in and concerned for the welfare of the boys at Camp Green Lake, his heart begins to harden after being exposed to so much cruelty. For instance, Stanley at first goes along with [Mr. Pendanski](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/mr-pendanski) and the other boys in thinking that [Zero](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/zero-hector-zeroni) is stupid and has nothing to offer; it's not until Zero shows Stanley unprecedented kindness that Stanley begins to take Zero seriously and treat him kindly in return. This culminates in Stanley trying to steal the water truck and go after Zero, who has run into the desert. When Stanley finds Zero, he carries the weak boy up the mountain, helps him drink, and sings him an old family lullaby—which appears to break the family curse. Stanley and Zero eventually return to Camp Green Lake, where they discover a suitcase full of valuable things and are rescued from the [Warden](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/the-warden) and a yellow-spotted lizard's nest by [Ms. Morengo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/ms-morengo), Stanley's lawyer. After this, Stanley demonstrates that he's learned the importance of kindness by refusing to leave camp without Zero.

***Mrs. Bell***

Stanley's math teacher at the middle school who unintentionally embarrassed him by using him to illustrate the principles of ratios. Stanley and the lightest kid in the class were utilized to demonstrate the 3 to 1 ratio....Stanley being three times heavier than the lightest kid in class.

***Stanley Yelnats III***

Stanley Yelnats III is Stanley's father, a well-meaning inventor who "never has any luck," and struggles to support his family with his bumbling explorations into "tennis-shoe recycling." Miraculously, he keeps a positive attitude always saying, "I learn from failure." [Stanley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/stanley-yelnats)'s father is the third Stanley Yelnats. He's an inventor, though his inventions are never very successful. He claims not to believe in the family curse but he also regularly blames mishaps on [Elya Yelnats](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/elya-yelnats). When [Stanley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/stanley-yelnats) is convicted, his father is working on discovering a way to recycle old sneakers. While Stanley is at camp, he learns that the stench from this endeavor may lead to his family's eviction from their home. Stanley's father experiences a breakthrough immediately after Stanley carries [Zero](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/zero-hector-zeroni) up the mountain and breaks the curse: he develops what he later names Sploosh, which is a fruity and spicy spray to cure foot odor. [Clyde Livingston](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/clyde-livingston) later promotes the product.

***Stanley Yelnats I***

Stanley's great grandfather who made a fortune in the stock market, only to have it stolen on his way West when it was taken from the stagecoach by the bandit Kissing Kate Barlow. The first Stanley was the son of [Elya Yelnats](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/elya-yelnats) and [Sarah Miller](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/sarah-miller). He made his fortune in the stock market on the east coast in the mid-late 1800s, went west with a valuable suitcase, but was robbed by [Kissin' Kate Barlow](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/miss-katherine-kissin-kate-barlow). She left him in the desert, where he survived for 17 days on "[God's Thumb](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/symbols/god-s-thumb)"—although, when he came out of his delirium in the hospital, he had no idea what that even means. He married his nurse and remained in Texas, where the Yelnats family lives to the present day.

***Kissing Kate Barlow***

The woman bandit known for kissing her victims who stole Stanley Yelnat I's fortune. In 1880s Green Lake, Miss Katherine was the town’s beloved schoolteacher. She was beautiful, charming, and an exceptional educator, and so she was beloved by children, parents, and her adult students alike. She also won a special prize at the Fourth of July picnic every year for her spiced peaches. The town expected her to marry [Trout Walker](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/charles-trout-walker), the wealthiest bachelor, but Miss Katherine turned down his advances. Miss Katherine was also friends with [Sam](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/sam), the African-American onion seller. He fixed the schoolhouse over the course of a semester, and at the end, Miss Katherine and Sam discovered that they'd fallen in love. They kissed in the rain one night not long after. Miss Katherine was distraught the next day when Trout Walker led a mob to torch the schoolhouse, and the [sheriff](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/the-sheriff) refused to do anything about it. She was shocked and disgusted when the sheriff asked for a kiss, and she tried to help Sam escape. Trout Walker shot Sam and rescued her. Three days later, Miss Katherine killed the sheriff and kissed him. She spent the next twenty years as Kissin' Kate Barlow, one of the most feared outlaws in the west. During those twenty years, she attacked a stagecoach carrying the first Stanley Yelnats and stole his suitcase full of valuable bonds and promissory notes, which she buried in Green Lake (which was, by then, a ghost town). Trout Walker came for her treasure twenty years after Sam's death and she died laughing after refusing to tell him where she buried the first Stanley's suitcase. In the present day, [Zero](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/zero-hector-zeroni) survives in the desert by eating her canned spiced peaches, which survived for over 100 years in Sam's boat on the dried-up lake.

***Mr. Sir***

Mr. Sir is one of the two adult chaperones at Camp Green Lake. Mr. Sir has a tattoo of a rattlesnake on his arm, is constantly chewing on sunflower seeds - a habit he started when he quit smoking, and frequently reminds the boys that Camp Green Lake is "not for Girl Scouts." Mr. Sir is not kind or caring about the boys. The man does his job, delivers water when necessary, and monitors the activities of the boys, but he has a mean streak, clearly demonstrated when he denies Stanley water because of what the warden has done to Mr. Sir. Mr. Sir is a nasty middle manager at Camp Green Lake. He's especially grumpy because, when [Stanley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/stanley-yelnats) arrives, Mr. Sir has recently quit smoking; instead, he eats sunflower seeds by the bag. His favorite catchphrase is to say that Camp Green Lake isn't a [Girl Scout](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/symbols/girl-scouts) camp, and he loves telling campers that they're not in the Girl Scouts anymore. Mr. Sir is a callous man who thinks little of the lives of the boys at camp; he tells Stanley outright that he's not worth wasting bullets on. He's also extremely vindictive. When Stanley takes the blame for stealing Mr. Sir's sunflower seeds, the [Warden](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/the-warden) believes that bringing the matter to her is a waste of her time, so she hits and scratches Mr. Sir across the face with her rattlesnake venom-infused nail polish. This causes Mr. Sir's face to swell painfully, and he goes on to punish Stanley by depriving him of water for more than a week. He's later complicit in destroying Zero's records. Much to Mr. Sir's chagrin, after the [Attorney General](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters) shuts Camp Green Lake down, it eventually becomes a [Girl Scout](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/symbols/girl-scouts) camp.

***Mr. Pendanski***

Younger than Mr. Sir, he has a thick black beard and a balding head. Mr. Pendanski takes the role of "counselor," hoping to rehabilitate the boys and make them productive members of society. Mr. Pendanski tries to teach the boys manners, gives them encouragement, and makes a point of calling the boys by their given names instead of by their nicknames. The boys call Mr. Pendanski, "Mom," but like the Warden, Mr. Pendanski isn't as nice as he seems. Mr. Pedanski makes derogatory comments about Zero and humiliates him, trying to blame him for the "riot." Mr. Pendanski is the Tent D counselor. He's relatively young and wears a buzz cut, but he also has a thick curly beard. The Tent D boys refer to him as “Mom,” which he allows. He does, however, make a point to call his charges by their given names. He often attempts to give them pep talks and inspirational speeches about personal responsibility and life after Camp Green Lake. Of all the named authority figures, Mr. Pendanski is by far the kindest; he gives [Stanley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/stanley-yelnats) extra water when he realizes [Mr. Sir](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/mr-sir) is depriving Stanley and even offers to give Stanley a ride back to camp after his first day digging. Despite these positive qualities, Mr. Pendanski also thinks very little of [Zero](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/zero-hector-zeroni) and is constantly cruel to him. He insists that Zero has nothing to offer, is unable to learn, and is only good for digging holes. This culminates in Zero hitting Mr. Pendanski across the face with a shovel. Later, Mr. Pendanski is complicit in destroying Zero's records. It's unclear what fate befalls Mr. Pendanski after the camp shuts down.

***Squid / Alan***

A white kid in Stanley's Work Group D, who Stanley finds crying and tries to comfort one night. Squid also asks Stanley to contact his mother and tell her that "Alan" is sorry.

***X-ray / Rex***

Another boy in Work Group D, X-Ray wears thick glasses, often covered with dirt. The name X-Ray is really pig Latin for his real name, Rex, and is an almost cruel nickname since X-Ray is nearly blind and can't see anything. Even so, X-Ray is the most powerful in the hierarchy of boys, always the first in line and the one who makes decisions. One of the three black boys. X-Ray is a small boy in Tent D. Despite his size, he's the leader of the group and is always first in line for water. Though he allows others to believe that he got his nickname because he has sharp eyesight, in reality, X-Ray is just Rex in pig Latin and he has terrible eyesight. After [Stanley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/stanley-yelnats) finds the fossil, X-Ray asks that if Stanley finds anything else, he give it to him—he's been at Camp Green Lake a year and believes he's the most deserving of a day off.

***Barf Bag***

The boy who had Stanley's cot before Stanley arrived. Since the cot smelled like old, sour milk, the meaning of the nickname "Barf Bag" became evident to Stanley.

***Magnet / Jose***

A boy in Work Group D who is appropriately called "Magnet" because he has sticky fingers and steals objects, like Mr. Sir's bag of sunflower seeds.

***Theodore / Armpit***

Besides Stanley, he's the biggest boy in Work Group D; he is always willing to do whatever X-Ray says. One of the three black boys.

***Zigzag / Ricky***

Another fellow member of Work Group D who has frizzy, wild blond hair and a huge head sitting on a long skinny neck. Zigzag is one of the boys in Tent D. He's white and one of the tallest at camp, though this is mostly because his neck is exceptionally long. He takes a great deal of offense to [Stanley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/stanley-yelnats) and Zero's agreement for Zero to dig part of Stanley's hole, so he begins a fight with Stanley with [Mr. Pendanski](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/mr-pendanski)'s blessing. He also tells the [Warden](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/the-warden) about the agreement, which culminates in Zero heading off alone into the desert after hitting Mr. Pendanski with a shovel.

***Zero / Hector***

Zero is the boy in Work Group D who always finishes digging his hole first. Everyone calls him "Zero" because they think he is dumb and can do nothing. However, Zero simply can't read because he never got to go to school because his mother left him at home one day, and he had to fend for himself. Zero asks Stanley to teach him to read in exchange for an hour of hole digging every day. One of the three black boys.

Lake who is referred to by his nickname by other campers and [Mr. Pendanski](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/mr-pendanski) alike; Mr. Pendanski is vocal about his belief that Zero is stupid and useless. This understandably makes Zero even angrier. None of the other boys like Zero much; he's consistently relegated to the last spot in line for water and the other boys join in Mr. Pendanski's jokes about Zero's worthlessness. He and Stanley become friends when Zero admits that he doesn't know how to read and asks Stanley to teach him. Stanley eventually learns that Zero is a very quick study and is skilled at performing mental math, despite having no formal education. In exchange for reading lessons, Zero digs part of Stanley's hole every day. After an altercation over this arrangement, Zero hits Mr. Pendanski across the face with a shovel and heads off into the desert alone. A day later, Stanley discovers that Zero is a ward of the state and thus, Mr. Pendanski and the [Warden](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/the-warden) decide to destroy Zero's records and erase his entire existence. When Stanley goes out after Zero and finds him, Zero has been living under Sam's boat, eating Miss Katherine's peach preserves that he calls "sploosh." This makes him very ill. After carrying Zero to the top of [God's Thumb](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/symbols/god-s-thumb), Stanley helps Zero drink and sings him his great-great grandfather's lullaby. As Zero recovers and as he and Stanley head back to camp, he tells Stanley about [his mother](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/stanley-s-mother). Zero also confesses that he stole Clyde Livingston's shoes; he thought it was better to steal old shoes than brand new ones. In the epilogue, the reader learns that Zero is actually Madame Zeroni's great-great-great grandson, and it broke the Yelnats family curse when Stanley carried Zero up the mountain. Zero uses his money from the first Stanley's suitcase to find his mother.

***Clyde "Sweet Feet" Livingston***

A famous baseball player who donates a pair of beautiful tennis shoes to an auction to raise money for poor children. These are the same shoes that fall on Stanley's head and which get him accused of robbery. The shoes don't smell very good, illustrating that the nickname "Sweet Feet" is the exact opposite of reality. Clyde "Sweet Feet" Livingston is a famous baseball player. He also suffers from an incurable foot fungus that makes his feet smell like dead fish. Despite this, he donates an old pair of his shoes to a local homeless shelter to auction them off, even though they reek. [Zero](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/zero-hector-zeroni) steals the shoes, though [Stanley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/stanley-yelnats) is the one convicted of the crime. Stanley idolizes Clyde Livingston and has a poster of the baseball player on his wall until it's confiscated as evidence. When Livingston testifies at Stanley's trial, he heartbreakingly calls Stanley a terrible person for stealing from homeless children. In the epilogue, Livingston and the Yelnats family presumably have made up for this, as he's the spokesperson for Stanley's father's cure for foot odor, Sploosh.

***Derrick Dunne***

A school bully who picked on Stanley. Derrick is much smaller than Stanley and so even when Stanley complained to the teachers, they didn't believe that Derrick could have been a menace to a big kid like Stanley. Derrick stole Stanley's notebook from him and threw it into the toilet the day that Stanley was arrested for the tennis-shoe theft. Stanley had missed the bus while getting his notebook out of the toilet and had to walk home.

***Elya Yelnats***

The first in a long line of male Yelnats that began in Latvia, Elya is responsible for the curse on the family because he did not fulfill his promise to Madame Zeroni and carry her up the mountain to drink from the stream after he had fattened his pig. Elya is referred to as Stanley's “no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather.” He's responsible for cursing the Yelnats family after he broke a promise to his friend [Madame Zeroni](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/madame-zeroni). Elya is described as being a kind, if somewhat idealistic, teen; he's far more interested in spending time with Madame Zeroni than he is in mud wrestling, which is held up as the sport of desirable bachelors. At age fifteen in mid-1800s Latvia, Elya fell in love with a girl named [Myra](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/myra-menke). To win her hand, Madame Zeroni told Elya to carry a runty piglet up a mountain every day. There, the piglet was to drink from a stream and Elya was to sing it a special song. On the day of Myra's birthday, Elya was then supposed to carry Madame Zeroni up the mountain. However, Elya neglected to carry the pig up the hill on the last day and because of this, the pig weighed exactly the same as Igor Barkov's pig. In his disappointment at losing his love's hand, Elya boarded a ship bound for America and broke his promise to Madame Zeroni. Elya was insistent that the curse was nonsense; he was sad only because he felt bad for breaking his promise, as he knew how much she wanted to drink from the stream. Though he never admits that the curse might be real, he does tell his wife, [Sarah Miller](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/sarah-miller), about the curse after lightning strikes his barn for a third time.

***Myra Menke***

The beautiful but empty-headed young woman in Latvia who Elya wants to court. Myra is the reason Elya wants a fattened pig. Myra, however, isn't smart enough to recognize that he loves her, and that this emotion is worth more than the pig, and should have been enough to win her hand against the older pig farmer who offered no love, just a pig. Myra is the object of [Elya Yelnats](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/elya-yelnats)'s affection in mid-1800s Latvia. Though she's exceptionally beautiful, [Madame Zeroni](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/madame-zeroni) describes her as being "as empty as a flower pot." Elya eventually discovers that this is true: though he thought Myra loved him, when asked to choose between him and [Igor Barkov](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/igor-barkov), Myra cannot make a decision and instead she asks her suitors to choose numbers between one and ten so that chance can make her decision for her. She marries Igor.

***Igor Barkov***

Igor is the 57-year-old pig farmer with fat cheeks who is also courting Myra Menke and against whom Elya Yelnats has to compete.

***Madame Zeroni***

An old, wheel chair bound woman who had lost her left foot. Madame Zeroni was an Egyptian woman who gave advice and was friends with Elya Yelnats. The woman tells Elya that "Myra's head is as empty as a flowerpot," but at Stanley's insistence, she gives him advice on how to get a fat pig to compete with Igor Barkov's in return for a promise. The old woman asks Elya, after he has fattened the pig she gives to him, to carry her up the mountain to drink out of the stream while he sings her a song. Madame Zeroni tells Elya that if he doesn't fulfill his promise to her, he and all his descendents will be "doomed for all eternity." In the present, Madame Zeroni is described as a "Gypsy woman;" in reality, Madame Zeroni was Egyptian. In mid-1800s Latvia, she was an elderly woman and was good friends with [Elya Yelnats](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/elya-yelnats). When Elya approached her, sad that he was going to be unable to marry [Myra Menke](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/myra-menke), Madame Zeroni initially cautioned that Myra wasn't worth the trouble. However, against her better judgment, she gave Elya a runty piglet and instructed him to carry the piglet up the nearby mountain every day. There, the piglet was supposed to drink from the stream as Elya sang a special song to the pig. This was supposed to make the pig bigger than Igor's pig, who was Elya's rival for Myra’s hand. On the final day, Elya was to carry Madame Zeroni up the hill (she has only one foot and couldn't climb herself) and sing her the song while she drank from the stream. Madame Zeroni told Elya that if he failed at any of this, his family would be cursed for eternity. Elya did indeed fail to follow through and began to wonder if the curse was real when he arrived in America. Though he asked people often if they knew of anyone named Zeroni, he never found any relatives of hers. In the present, [Zero](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/zero-hector-zeroni) is Madame Zeroni's great-great-great grandson.

***Sarah Miller***

A strong, hard-working, practical girl who marries Elya when he arrives in the United States. Sarah is smart and can do chores like milking and plowing. Sarah and Elya love talking and laughing together, even though bad luck always strikes them.

***The Lump***

The Lump was a big, tough guy who pokes Stanley in the "wreck" room after Stanley trips over his leg. Armpit and X-Ray tell the Lump he shouldn't mess with the Caveman because he's "one tough dude."

***Caveman***

The nickname the other boys give to Stanley after he digs his first hole but finds he is trapped there because he doesn't have the strength to pull himself out.

***The Warden***

A tall, red-haired, freckle-faced woman who paints her fingernails with dark red nail polish made from rattlesnake venom. The Warden's words are nice, but her actions are not and she demands complete, unquestioning obedience from Mr. Sir and Mr. Pendanski using all kinds of subtle threats and intimidation to get it.

The Warden, the novel's villain, owns and runs Camp Green Lake in the Texas desert. She's a tall, red-haired woman who is soft spoken but nasty: she knows that she's the most powerful person at camp and uses this to intimidate anyone who challenges or bothers her, children and adults alike. When she feels as though [Mr. Sir](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/mr-sir) is wasting her time by bringing up his stolen sunflower seeds to her, she viciously hits him across the face with her rattlesnake venom-infused nail polish, leaving him in excruciating pain and with massive swelling on his face for days. Though it's never confirmed, the boys of Tent D tell [Stanley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/stanley-yelnats) that the Warden has hidden cameras and microphones around the camp to constantly spy on the teenage inmates. Stanley discovers relatively quickly that the Warden is looking for something specific in the desert. Through flashbacks, the reader learns that the Warden is Trout Walker's descendant and her family has owned the land around Green Lake for generations. When [X-Ray](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/x-ray-rex) "discovers" the lipstick tube from [Kate Barlow](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/miss-katherine-kissin-kate-barlow), the Warden gets excited and proves a terrifying overseer when it becomes clear that she's not going to find what she's looking for. Later, when [Zero](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/zero-hector-zeroni) walks off into the desert alone, the Warden shows just how cruel she is and how little she thinks of her charges: she asks [Mr. Pendanski](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/mr-pendanski) to erase Zero's records, implying that if Zero somehow doesn't die in the desert, he'll somehow die when he returns to camp. Days later, when Stanley and Zero do unearth the first Stanley's suitcase that Kate Barlow buried in the desert, the Warden engages in a standoff for more than twelve hours with the boys, who are surrounded by yellow-spotted lizards. She callously asks Zero why he isn't dead yet and when [Ms. Morengo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/ms-morengo) and the [Attorney General](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters) arrive, she attempts to act as though she cares about the boys and about observing protocol, though her constantly changing story reveals she cares only about herself. After Stanley and Zero leave camp, the Warden is forced to sell Camp Green Lake.

***Katherine Barlow / Kissing Kate Barlow***

The only school teacher in the Camp Green Lake of 110 years ago when it was a large, beautiful town. Kate was loved by her students and famous for her spiced peaches. Kate falls in love with Sam, the Onion Man, and tries to escape the town that has burned the schoolhouse and threatened to lynch Sam. After the tragedy of Sam and Mary Lou's death, Katherine shoots the sheriff, grants his wish for a kiss, and becomes one of the most feared outlaws in the West, Kissing Kate Barlow. Twenty years later, she returns to the dried-up town and is accosted by Trout and Linda Walker who want the treasure she has stolen. The couple makes her walk through the desert, and when a lizard bites her, she dies without telling where she buried the treasure.

***Trout (Charles) Walker***

The richest young man in the county who wanted Katherine Barlow to marry him. Charles Walker was called "Trout" because he had smelly feet from a foot fungus. Trout was not smart and wouldn't try to learn, and was angry when Katherine refused to go with him on a boat ride. Charles Walker is the eligible bachelor of the richest family in 1880s Green Lake. He's most often referred to as Trout Walker; the nickname comes from his feet, which are afflicted with an incurable foot fungus that makes them smell like rotting fish. He's described as loud, stupid, and entitled—and proud of being all three. He's extremely angry when [Miss Katherine](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/miss-katherine-kissin-kate-barlow) turns down his advances and after she runs away with [Sam](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/sam), he takes justice into his own hands. He shoots Sam and "rescues" Katherine, after which no rain falls on Green Lake for the next 110 years. Twenty years later, Trout and his new wife, [Linda](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters), find Kate living on the edge of Green Lake and attempt to make her give up her treasure, having lost their own fortune as the lake dried up. The Walker family lives on the lake until the present, digging for Kate's treasure. The [Warden](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/the-warden) is Trout's descendant.

***Dr. Hawthorne***

The doctor of the Camp Green Lake of the 1800's. Dr. Hawthorne happily allowed Sam to recommend onion medicines to his patients and was never sure whether it was his medicine or Sam's that helped cure the illness. Dr. Hawthorne believed enough in Sam's medicines that he used an onion ointment on his baldhead.

***Sam, the Onion Man***

The black man who raised onions and made the onions into all kinds of medicines. The townspeople came to him as much as to Dr. Hawthorne for "cures," and believed that his onions were the cause of their good health. Sam and Dr. Hawthorne always worked together and credit each other for any improvements in health. Sam works to improve the school building for Katherine in exchange for her famous spiced peaches. Sam and Katherine fall in love and share a kiss on the street before they are discovered and persecuted. Sam is the black onion seller in 1880s Green Lake. He touts the healing powers of onions, citing his donkey Mary Lou as evidence: he claims that she's nearly 50 and never gets sick because she eats only onions. Nobody is sure if they can believe him, given that Sam himself is only twenty. Aside from selling onions, Sam also makes a number of tinctures and ointments out of onions meant to cure all manner of illnesses and ailments. Even [Doc Hawthorn](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters) uses Sam's cream to cure balding. Sam is gregarious and appears to be loved by all. He and [Miss Katherine](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/miss-katherine-kissin-kate-barlow) form a friendship and then a romance when he offers to fix the dilapidated schoolhouse for her. When there's no more to fix at the schoolhouse, Sam kisses Katherine in the rain, insisting it will fix her breaking heart. However, because Sam is African-American, the kiss is illegal and the townsfolk riot. Sam and Katherine attempt to escape across the lake to Sam's secret onion fields, but Trout Walker's motorized boat is inescapable. Trout shoots Sam in the water, which puts a curse on Green Lake: no rain falls until [Stanley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/stanley-yelnats) and [Hector](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/zero-hector-zeroni), 110 years later, set things right. Katherine tries to avenge Sam's death by killing the [sheriff](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/the-sheriff), who wanted to hang Sam.

***Mary Lou***

Sam's donkey that was reported to be fifty years old and to have survived that long in good health because she only ate onions. Mary Lou was shot by Trout Walker when he came after Sam and Kate.

***Hattie Parker***

A woman from the Camp Green Lake of 110 years ago who sees Sam and Katherine kissing and says, "God will punish you!"

***Sheriff***

Chief Law officer of the old-time, thriving Camp Green Lake, he drinks whiskey and tries to force Katherine into kissing him. Eventually, Katherine gets her revenge on him by killing him and giving him a kiss after he is dead. The sheriff is a racist and powerful man in 1880s Green Lake. He's prepared to hang [Sam](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/sam) for kissing [Miss Katherine](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/miss-katherine-kissin-kate-barlow), and he drunkenly bullies Miss Katherine to try to get her to kiss him. He tells Miss Katherine that God will punish her for kissing Sam, and he presumably supports [Trout Walker](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/charles-trout-walker) when he shoots Sam and "rescues" Katherine. Three days later, Miss Katherine shoots the sheriff and gives him the kiss he asked for.

***Linda Miller***

A redheaded woman who had been a young student of Katherine Barlow's and who eventually married Trout Walker for his money. Linda is responsible for the death of Kate Barlow.

***Twitch***

The boy sent to Group D at Camp Green Lake to replace Zero. The boy is called Twitch because he fidgets a lot - particularly when he gets around cars and was sent to Camp Green Lake for auto theft.

***Gladys Tennyson***

The woman from the old Camp Green Lake who runs out in her nightclothes to tell Sam, the Onion Man, that his medicine cured her daughter who was sick from eating bad meat.

***Ms. Morengo***

Stanley's attorney who comes to release him from camp.

***Attorney General***

A tall man who accompanies Ms. Morengo to camp to provide the necessary paperwork and authorization to release Stanley.

***Zereo’s Mother:***

Though [Zero](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/zero-hector-zeroni)'s mother is described as being quite young, she looks older than she is and as though she's seen a number of unpleasant things in her life. Zero begins to tell Stanley about her as he recovers on [God's Thumb](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/symbols/god-s-thumb). He recounts memories of her singing the same lullaby that Stanley's family has passed down for generations. She and Zero became homeless when Zero was very small, and she would often leave him places when she went to do things alone. Though it's unclear what exactly happened or when it happened, she abandoned him at a playground. After Zero gets money from the first Stanley's suitcase, he hires private investigators to find her and succeeds.

***Stanley’s Mother:***

Stanley's mother insists there's no family curse, though she also can't ignore the fact that things go wrong for her family often. While [Stanley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/stanley-yelnats) is at Camp Green Lake, he and his mother write letters to each other. His mother appreciates Stanley's attempts to make it seem like he's at a real summer camp, as it makes her feel like a much wealthier parent.

***Objects/Places***

***Camp Fun and Games***

Stanley's mocking name for Camp Green Lake. Since he'd never been to camp before, he had imagined what he'd get to do, and he pretends like he is having fun in the letters to his parents.

***Camp Green Lake***

Camp Green Lake is the name of the rehabilitation facility set up in the middle of the Texas desert where boys who have gotten into trouble are given the punishment of digging a hole every day.

**Fortune**

Stanley Yelnats the 1st was a rich man before he moved west and was robbed by Kissing Kate Barlow. Stanley Yelnats IV discovers the fortune buried in a metal case that bears the name of Stanley Yelnats. The fortune consists of $20,000 worth of jewels, and almost two million dollars worth of stocks, bonds, notes, and other old financial documents.

**God's Thumb**

When Stanley's great-grandfather was rescued from the desert, he had been there 17 days and was insane, but he said he survived by taking refuge on God's Thumb. Stanley catches a glimpse of a rock formation in the desert and realizes that this is "God's Thumb," so he and Zero head there in the hopes of finding refuge.

**Green Lake, the town**

A hundred and ten years before Camp Green Lake existed, a beautiful, thriving town named "Green Lake" was situated on the edge of the lake. The town is the setting for the sad story of Katherine Barlow and Sam, the Onion man.

**Group D**

The group of boys that Stanley lives and works with. In addition to Stanley, at various times the group consists of X-Ray, Armpit, Squid, Zigzag, Magnet, Zero, and Twitch.

**Holes**

The punishment for each boy is to dig one hole, exactly five feet deep and five feet wide, each day. The land around Camp Green Lake is filled with holes - everywhere you look.

**Hot Fudge Sundae**

How Stanley encourages Zero to keep going up the mountain, pretending that when they get there, food will be waiting. When Stanley gets Zero to the top and they have collapsed, Stanley finds an onion and gives Zero a bite, telling him it's a hot fudge sundae.

**Jaffy**

The name of the imaginary giraffe that Zero thinks about when he's waiting for his mother. Zero stays a month in a public park by himself waiting, sleeping in the tunnel on the playground.

**Letters**

Stanley writes letters home to his parents, always putting on a brave face and pretending that the activities at Camp Green Lake are fun. Stanley's mother writes back telling him they're proud of him for making the best of a bad situation and explaining the events at home, including the fact that the landlord was considering evicting them because of the bad smell in their apartment.

**Lipstick Tube**

Stanley finds a gold tube engraved with the initials K.B. as he's digging. Stanley gives it to X-Ray to use as a way to get the day off. However, Stanley figures out that the gold tube is half of an old lipstick tube owned by Kissing Kate Barlow and he goes back to dig for the treasure where he first found the tube.

**Mary Lou**

The name of Sam's old boat (named after his beloved donkey), which is left in the dry lakebed and turned upside down. Zero gets under it and uses it for shelter and it's there that he finds the jars of old Sploosh.

**Onions**

Sam, the Onion Man who lived at Green Lake 110 years before the Camp was established, was the grower and seller of the town's onions. Sam believed that onions would cure any physical problem, and the townspeople always bought Sam's onion concoctions to use with Dr. Hawthorne's cures. Onions also deter yellow-spotted lizards.

**Pig**

Madame Zeroni agrees to help Elya Yelnats compete against Igor Barkov, a pig farmer, for the love of Myra Menke. Madame Zeroni gives Elya a piglet that Elya must carry up the mountain every day to let it drink from the stream. Elya is supposed to sing a song to it, too. When Elya breaks his promise to come back and carry Madame Zeroni up the mountain, his family is "cursed," and Elya gets the blame for the Yelnats' family's problems. Elya becomes known to Stanley as his "no-good- dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather."

**Pig Lullaby**

The song that Elya Yelnats was supposed to sing to the pig he carried up the mountain every day as it drank from the stream. The song is sung by Stanley's father to him, and later, the song in a slightly different form is sung by Zero's mother.

First song Stanley's father sings to him:

"'If only, if only,' the woodpecker sighs

'The bark on the trees was just a little bit softer.'

While the wolf waits below, hungry and lonely,

He cries to the moo-oo-oon,

'If only, if only.'"

Translated by Sarah Miller Yelnats to:

"'If only, if only,' the woodpecker sighs,

'The bark on the trees was as soft as the skies,'

While the wolf waits below, hungry and lonely

Crying to the moo-oo-oon,

'If only, if only.'"

**Schoolhouse**

Sweet Miss Katherine Barlow who everyone loved taught Green Lake's schoolhouse. Miss Barlow asked Sam to fix up the schoolhouse, making repairs and improvements. During this time, Katherine and Sam fall in love and kiss, but the town finds out, and in anger, burn the schoolhouse down.

**Shovels**

Every day, each boy has his own shovel to dig with, and a hole is big enough when a shovel can be laid flat across the bottom of the hole and stand up on its blade and have the top of the handle at the top of the hole. (A shovel is exactly 5 feet long although X-Ray always insists on a certain shovel that he thinks is a fraction of an inch smaller than the others.)

**Sploosh**

Old jars filled with something faintly fruity that Zero finds hidden under the remains of a boat. Zero opens these, drinks, and shares the content with Stanley, as they try to survive in the desert. At the end of the book, Sploosh is also the name of the product that Stanley's father invents to eliminate foot odor.

**Sunflower Seeds**

Mr. Sir constantly eats sunflower seeds. It's a habit he picked up when he stopped smoking. Sunflower seeds are important to the story because yellow-spotted lizards eat the shells. When Magnet steals Mr. Sir's bag of sunflower seeds and Stanley drops the seeds into the hole, this causes a lot of lizards to live near the area where Stanley goes to dig for the fortune later.

**"Sweet Feet" Livingston's Tennis Shoes**

Tennis shoes donated by Clyde Livingston, the famous baseball player, to a homeless shelter to raise money. Stolen by Zero, and then dropped on Stanley, who was accused of the crime.

**Yellow-Spotted Lizards**

A lizard, six to ten inches in length, with eleven yellow spots on a yellow green body. The lizard has black teeth, a white tongue, and the skin around its yellow eyes is red. Known for living in holes, the "yellow-spotted lizard" congregates in large groups and possesses a deadly poisonous venom. "If you've ever been close enough to see the yellow spots, you're probably dead." The lizards can jump out of holes with their strong legs and love to eat sunflower seed shells.

**Water Trucks**

The two counselors of Group D, Mr. Pendanski and Mr. Sir alternate trips to the digging site, driving a truck filled with water to fill the boys' canteens.

**Wreck Room**

The boys' name for the "rec room" at Camp Green Lake, which is a "wreck" because everything is broken.

**Themes**

**Justice**

Louis Sachar's novel *Holes* deals with the issue of justice. This theme is present on several levels. First, there's the idea that in order for justice to happen, people must be punished for their crimes. That's why all the boys are sent to Camp Green Lake....to do time for their crime. It's possible that what happens at Camp Green Lake is a comment on the justice system in America. People who make mistakes have the chance to make amends, but doing so is hard and is not done under pleasant circumstances.

Rehabilitation is part of the overall picture, and that's the intent of the Camp. Here, bad boys are rehabilitated into "good" ones by hard work, which builds strong character and strong body.

Justice is sometimes corrupted. This is what happens when bad people like The Warden and Mr. Sir are placed in authority over those who have no power. At Camp Green Lake, there is not a system of checks and balances, and the Warden can eliminate the records of Zero and not be concerned about his safety or well-being. It's also frustrating to see Stanley's innocence and know that he lost his case in court simply because his family was poor and couldn't afford a lawyer.

On an even bigger scale, justice is an issue. When Katherine Barlow falls in love with Sam the Onion Man, who happens to be black, they kiss and are seen by Hattie Parker who tells them, "God will punish you!" The author, Louis Sachar, immediately asks the reader to decide for himself who is being punished by pointing out that after Sam and Mary Lou are killed and Katherine is jailed, not one drop of rain has fallen on Camp Green Lake in more than a hundred years. The town itself dries up. Kate and Sam were punished by the townspeople, but the idea is that townspeople were punished by God.

The wrongs of the past are connected to the present, and it isn't until Stanley and Zero retrieve the treasure and right the wrongs of Kissing Kate Barlow that rain begins to fall again.

**Prejudice**

On occasion, the author mentions the race of the boys. There are three black boys, three white boys, and one Hispanic boy. However, the issue of race isn't very prevalent at modern day Camp Green Lake. It is only when Zero (who is black), offers to dig Stanley's hole for an hour a day, that the other boys start pulling the race card, saying that Stanley is using Zero as a slave and thinks he's much better than the rest of them.

However, several glaring examples of prejudice and racial problems exist. First, in the Camp Green Lake of 110 years before, Sam, the Onion Man can't be educated in Miss Katherine's school. Sam can only work to repair it and he certainly cannot fall in love with a white woman, much less openly kiss her. It's a sin punishable by death. The attitudes of the town people reflect the ignorance of prejudice. The man they had sought out for cures and who they had genuinely liked, is quickly killed. The prejudice of the town even causes them to destroy the schoolhouse that had been such a place of learning and joy. The prejudice against Sam and Katherine change the character of Katherine from a sweet schoolteacher to an outlaw as she tries to get her own justice on the people.

Another example of prejudice is not based on race, but on perception. Mr. Pendanski, who isn't openly unkind or unfair to anyone else, has it in for Zero. Mr. Pedanski insults and humiliates him, openly saying that he's stupid, he can't do anything but dig holes, and that he'll never amount to anything. This pre-judgment seems really harsh once we know Zero's story. Zero doesn't know much because he has had to raise himself and never had the chance to go to school. Zero's story is a lesson that judging someone just by their looks is often unfair and unjust.

**Destiny and Curses**

The lullaby that Madame Zeroni teaches to Elya Yelnats starts out with the words, "if only, if only...." That phrase and the entire song tie into the issue of destiny. It's common to think, "if only this had been different...." or, "if only that hadn't happened, I never would have been in this situation," and this common thought is an important question in the book. Would the Yelnats' family have better luck if their ancestor hadn't stolen Madame Zeroni's pig and broken his promise? The reader is left to decide whether lives are molded by curses, by destiny, or by free choice and hard work. Stanley's mother always denies the curse, but the curse has become an excuse. Has that excuse actually kept them from succeeding?

Stanley struggles with the question of destiny. When the shoes fall from the sky, he says, "It wasn't destiny. It was his no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather." However later, on the mountaintop with Hector, knowing that Zero had stolen the shoes, he believes that destiny is affecting his life. "When the shoes first fell from the sky, he remembered thinking that destiny had struck him. Now, he thought so again. It was more than coincidence. It had to be destiny."

Words like, "what if," "destiny," "curses," and "luck" are important, and the reader will need to decide at the end of the book exactly what it is that changes the direction of Stanley and his family.

**Fate and Destiny:**

Holes follows fourteen-year-old [Stanley Yelnats](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/elya-yelnats), didn't follow through on a bargain he struck with a "gypsy" woman, [Madame Zeroni](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/the-first-stanley-yelnats) 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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/miss-katherine-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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/sam), an African-American onion seller, his murder by the wealthy white man [Trout Walker](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/charles-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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/stanley-s-father) 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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/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. Kindness:**

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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/zero-hector-zeroni), 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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/symbols/girl-scouts) 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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/madame-zeroni), a distant grandmother of Zero's, put on [Elya Yelnats](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/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:**

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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/miss-katherine-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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/stanley-yelnats) 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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/charles-trout-walker) and then fell in love with the black onion seller [Sam](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters) 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:**

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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/zero-hector-zeroni) and [Zero's mother](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/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:**

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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/charles-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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/stanley-yelnats) clearly reads the land as sentient. He makes note of the rock formation he refers to as "[God's Thumb](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/symbols/god-s-thumb)," where [the first Stanley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/the-first-stanley-yelnats) supposedly survived for seventeen days after Kissin' Kate abandoned him in the desert. As Stanley and [Zero](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/zero-hector-zeroni) 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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/symbols/girl-scouts) 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.

**Symbols:**

**Girl’s scout:**

Mr. Sir's favorite catchphrase is that "this isn't a Girl Scout camp," and calling the campers Girl Scouts is his favorite insult. This speaks to the way that those at Camp Green Lake gender their cruelty—it's masculine (and acceptable) to be cruel and perform hard labor, while anything else, even positive qualities like kindness or caring, are unfashionably feminine. In this way, Mr. Sir's catchphrase comes to encapsulate the toxic nature of the camp and show that the camp takes destructive masculine ideas to the extreme. When the narrator says at the end of the novel that a restored Camp Green Lake will actually be turned into a Girl Scout camp in the future, it suggests that, with balanced restored to the area of Green Lake, these more feminine qualities have prevailed and, contrary to Mr. Sir's beliefs, kindness and genuine care for others and the environment—as represented by the Girl Scouts—will govern the area going forward.

God’s Thumb:

God's Thumb, which [**Stanley**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/stanley-yelnats) also refers to as Big Thumb, is a rock formation in the mountains several miles away from Camp Green Lake. It looks like a fist making a thumbs-up sign on a massive scale. It comes to represent the sentience of nature within the world of the novel, especially as Stanley and [**Zero**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/zero-hector-zeroni) begin their journey towards it. Stanley in particular feels as though the rock is encouraging him and urging him on. Stanley, Zero, and [**the first Stanley**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/holes/characters/the-first-stanley-yelnats) all survive thanks to the water and onions available around the rock formation. This suggests that nature's benevolence is reserved for those who are willing to look for it and respect the natural world. On the other hand, God's Thumb is barely visible from Camp Green Lake, an area that has been effectively abandoned by nature, unless one is specifically looking for it.

**Onions**

## Onions symbolize a positive and healing factor in the novel. Sam, a character of good will and intelligence, loves onions and helps to cure sick people with the onion remedies that he makes. The onions allow Stanley and Zero to regain their health and rest before attempting to break free of the oppression of Camp Green Lake. The onions also help Stanley and Zero avoid bites from the deadly yellow- spotted lizards that frequent Camp Green Lake.

Onions are a definitely positive symbol in the novel. They represent happiness, as Sam the onion picker - with whom onions are continually linked in the novel through flashbacks - is always cheerful, friendly, and optimistic. He is very secretive and protective of his onion field, but very generous when it comes to bringing onions and onion products to the folks of Green Lake.

Onions also symbolize health and healing. Sam sells onions to cure a myriad of physical ills: they are "good for the digestion, the liver, the stomach, the lungs, the heart, and the brain." Sam's character is one of a fixer, since he fixes up the schoolhouse and has the motto: "I can fix that." In this way, he is a healer, and the onions are one means by which he does his healing. In the present-day narrative, Zero and Stanley owe their lives to the onions on top of God's Thumb. Without them, they would have starved to death and been unable to survive their escape from Camp Green Lake. The onions save the boys a second time, too. The only reason they are not bitten by the yellow-spotted lizards in the hole where they are digging for treasure is because there is onion coursing through their bloodstreams.

**Yellow-Spotted Lizards**

## Yellow-spotted lizards represent the deadly aspects of Camp Green Lake. They invaded the area after the life-giving lake dried up and they present a deadly threat to all humans at the camp. It was a yellow-spotted lizard that killed Kate Barlow and it is yellow-spotted lizards that threaten Stanley and Zero while they are digging for Stanley's great-grandfather's suitcase. The reason Stanley and Zero survive is because they have eaten so many onions (a positive and life-affirming symbol) that the lizards, who do not like onion blood, do not wish to bite them.

In Holes, lizards are an ominous symbol. They represent danger and the ever-present threat of death in the harsh landscape surrounding Camp Green Lake. This danger is made explicit in the first chapter, and the reader is warned by the narrator about the lizards before any action occurs, even before meeting the novel's protagonist. "You don't want to be bitten by a yellow-spotted lizard," Sachar writes, "That's the worst thing that can happen to you. You will die a slow and painful death" (4). Although the Warden can control the boys and even uses rattlesnake venom to her advantage by making it into nail polish, she cannot control the lizards, and she is just as frightened as the others. The only protection from the yellow-spotted lizards is onions, as we find out late in the novel, but the characters never realize that onion-tinged blood allows Stanley and Zero survive in the lizard-infested hole. It seems like a miracle to them.

The lizards strike fear into all the characters in the novel, from the boys to the camp counselors. Lizards cause the death of just one character though, and this character does not fear them: the infamous outlaw Kissin' Kate Barlow. In her case, she is released from the torture inflicted on her by Trout and Linda Walker, and she welcomes the bite because she has nothing left to live for. When she is bitten, she "smile[s]," and she "die[s] laughing," knowing that her enemies will never find the treasure she has buried (123). The lizards don't hold any power over those who are beyond the law and don't care about the world anymore, because they instill fear, and someone who doesn't care about life does not fear death.

**Motifs:**

**Physical Environment**

In *Holes,* the characters' physical environment acts as a metaphor for their emotional states. Camp Green Lake is dry, hard, and hot. It is a physically unpleasant place to be and the people who live there lead unpleasant lives. The counselors are cruel and the boys are tough and often unfriendly. The mountain that Stanley and his great-grandfather call God's thumb, however, is lush and green. While Stanley is there he is free of outside threats and he is very happy.

**Names**

How things or people are named is important in *Holes.* People's names present one view of them when, in fact, their real personality might be very different. The name Kissin' Kate Barlow, for instance, brings to mind a dangerous outlaw while the name Miss Katherine suggests a mild mannered school teacher. The two names (and the two personalities) belong to the same person but the way in which she is perceived depends very heavily on what name she is given. Similarly, the nicknames that the boys give themselves at Camp Green Lake represent a separation of their life at home from their life at the camp. Stanley is known as a mild-mannered boy who is easily picked on at home but his name at camp, Caveman, suggests a fierce and strong boy who might be able to scare others. While Stanley does, in fact, become stronger and at points a little bit meaner while at Camp Green Lake, overall he keeps his genial personality from home.

**Holes**

Holes are a recurring image in the story with symbolic value. There are several different kinds of holes and digging in the aptly-named Holes: for example, the campers dig a hole every day, Stanley digs a hole to reach fresh water, and the boys find treasure at the bottom of a hole.

Holes are often a negative symbol in the book, as they represent hardship, adversity and grueling physical labor. This can be seen through the mocking tone in the quote: "If you take a bad boy and make him dig a hole every day in the hot sun, it will turn him into a good boy." Holes also suggest mundanity, repetition, and hopelessness, as Stanley spends a large proportion of the book digging holes, seemingly without reason and without continuity (he must start again every morning in a new hole). The opposite of a hole is a mountain - a protrusion from the ground rather than an indentation in it - and mountains are linked with safety, success, and survival (God's Thumb shelters and feeds the boys when they run away from Camp Green Lake, and the mountain and river in Lithuania have magic powers).

The symbolism is not uniformly negative, however, because the boys do find treasure in a hole, and without Camp Green Lake and their mind-numbing labor, Stanley and Zero would never have met and the Yelnats curse would never have been broken.

The titles of two of the novel's three parts have to do with holes. Part Two is literally named "The Last Hole," referring to the hole that Stanley and Zero dig that will change their family's futures. The final part of the novel is titled "Filling in the Holes," which is symbolic of closure: the closure of Camp Green Lake and the end of that episode in the boys' lives, as well as the end of the family curse. There is a blank slate, a level ground on which the family can start building their future, without worrying about what happened in the past. In this final part of the novel, there is another meaning of the "holes" in the title: the reader is told to "fill in the holes" in the story and imagine for themselves what happens to Zero and Stanley beyond what is explicitly stated in Chapter 50.

**Nature and the Land**

**The novel contains many references to the landscape** and natural features. These features of the setting take on a symbolic significance greater than just providing background to the action. The ironically named Green Lake is described in great detail: it is "a dry, flat wasteland" and "a big dry lake." Here, the land is described as barren and desolate to create a strong sense of despair, which mirrors and symbolizes the despair of the boys and the Warden. The Warden tries to master the lake and take control of the land she technically owns by digging lots of holes in hopes of unearthing treasure, but the landscape is indifferent and vast and will not give her what she wants. There is a constant sense of danger not only from rattlesnakes and yellow-spotted lizards, but also from running out of water or dying of heat stroke. Whatever happens in Camp Green Lake or in the surrounding desert, it is a struggle for survival - nothing is easy, and everything is uncertain.

God's thumb is the opposite of the Green Lake desert, and therefore holds an entirely different significance for the characters in both the past and the present narratives. The mountain is described through evocative imagery that styles it as a "refuge." This creates a sense of solace, presenting the mountain as a beautiful escape. Indeed, it is an escape for Stanley and Zero, who only manage to survive the desert because of the water and the onions that they find on top of God's Thumb. There are religious connotations, of course: it might be seen as a miracle or a gift from God. In addition. God's Thumb is associated only with the good characters in the novel, since Sam's onion field was there, and Stanley and Zero spend some time recovering there as well.

**Water**

Water is a symbol of hope and reward, as well as a literal, physical necessity. Green Lake used to be a lake, of course, until it dried up after Sam's brutal murder. A supernatural explanation is hinted at in the text, which asks us the question, "Whom did God punish?" The answer seems to be that God punished the inhabitants of Green Lake for allowing Sam to die, and punished in particular Trout Walker, who was responsible for Sam's death, owned most of the lake, and had the most to lose. At the end of the novel, some level of redemption has been achieved because it begins to rain at Camp Green Lake again for the first time in over a hundred years. Whatever curse was placed on the area after Sam's death has been lifted, just as the curse on the Yelnats family is lifted as well.

In the present day, water is "scarce" at the camp, however this means that the campers appreciate it all the more when they do get it, just as Stanley begins to appreciate other little things in life when deprived of them. Stanley describes his short shower as "four minutes of heaven." The boys are grateful when the water truck approaches, which represents a moment of freedom compared to the barren heat. Water is a huge focus in the latter half of the novel as well, especially when Zero and Stanley take off and have to survive without water. Overall, water is a positive symbol which contrasts with negative images of the dry land.

Metaphors and similies:

**Hot, Heavy Air (Simile)**

"The bus wasn't air conditioned, and the hot, heavy air was almost as stifling as the handcuffs" (6).

This simile clearly illustrates Stanley's uncomfortable situation and his lack of agency. The author creates a claustrophobic atmosphere and a strong sense that the character is trapped against his will, which is certainly the case. He is being shipped off to a hard labor camp for a crime he did not commit. He is being restrained by more than just handcuffs: the justice system is working against him, as is, more importantly for the rest of the novel, his family curse. Stanley isn't truly free because success is impossible for him as long as the Yelnats family is still under Madame Zeroni's curse. The reference to handcuffs is significant as it indicates Stanley's lack of freedom, a vital theme explored in juvenile fiction - especially juvenile fiction that deals with actual imprisonment and incarceration. It is significant that this quote occurs towards the start of the novel, which establishes the dominant tone of hardship and difficulty for Stanley and the other boys who are condemned to dig holes at Camp Green Lake.

## Myra's Head (Simile)

**"Myra's head is as empty as a flowerpot" (29).**

This simile manages to characterize Myra - a rather superficial and two-dimensional character - in one quick, effective stroke. There are negative connotations to this description, of course. Myra is naive, unintelligent, and foolish, Madame Zeroni tells Elya, and it later turns out that she is justified in taking this critical view of Myra. The comparison to a "flowerpot" also suggests femininity, emphasizing Myra's girlish qualities. This simile can also suggest her beauty, as flowers embody the beauty of nature, and the speaker later admits that the girl is very beautiful. However, these positive connotations are crucially undercut by the adjective "empty." This biting simile succinctly suggests that while Myra is gentle, feminine, and attractive, she is far from being smart.

## Huge Smile (Simile)

**"Now he had such a huge smile it almost seemed too big for his face, like the smile of a jack-o'-lantern" (58).**

This simile describes the first time Stanley sees Zero smile. This typically positive action is portrayed in a grotesque way. Stanley explains that because Zero is often angry, it is unusual when he does smile. For this reason, the author uses the simile to create a warped image of a wicked grimace. The comparison to a jack-o'-lantern has frightening connotations, and further emphasizes the incongruity of his smile. This simile gives great insight into Zero's character, presenting him as angry and bizarre, a boy that only Stanley can really get close to or elicit any positive reaction from. It is perhaps also important that this smile comes in the context of Stanley talking about his "no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather" - words that Zero's ancestor Madame Zeroni might equally have used when characterizing the man who forgot her and paid a heavy price for this betrayal.

## Green Lake (Simile)

**"One hundred and ten years ago, Green Lake was the largest lake in Texas. It was full of clear cool water, and it sparkled like a giant emerald in the sun" (101).**

The simile conveys the former beauty of the now dried Green Lake. The simile comparing the lake to "a giant emerald" creates a clear image of a pristine environment with nothing to besmirch its natural beauty. Emeralds also symbolize preciousness and wealth, further emphasizing the former beauty of the place, and also hinting at the material wealth that families like Trout Walker derived from the lake. This elaborate description juxtaposes with the current state of Green Lake, described as "a dry, flat wasteland." Water becomes a precious commodity in the present Camp Green Lake - truly precious as emeralds to the boys who suffer from thirst day in and day out. Thus, the simile is significant as it contrasts the locations former beauty with its current derelict state, to make the place appear even more hostile.

## Green Lake and Spiced Peaches (Simile)

**"It was said that Green Lake was 'heaven on earth' and that Miss Katherine's spiced peaches were 'food for the angels'" (102).**

This simile alludes to the former beauty of Green Lake, and evokes a strong sense of nostalgia through repetition of "were" and positive phrases such as "food for the angels." The religious imagery of heaven and angels is significant as it suggests that Green Lake used to be a Eden-like paradise, compared to the wasteland Stanley finds it in when he arrives. There is also a deliberate contrast between the delicious spiced peaches and the bland food the campers eat to further illustrate their dire situation.

## Mouth (Simile)

**"His mouth was as dry and as parched as the lake" (105).**

This simile clearly conveys Stanley's fear and his thirst, as well as the constant hardships the campers face in the harsh conditions of Camp Green Lake. Furthermore, the simile echoes the natural imagery throughout the novel and the motif of the lake, connecting Stanley's fear to the dry, barren landscape. In this way, the land represents the plight of the campers who dig in it.

# Holes Irony

## "This ain't a Girl Scout camp."

This phrase is repeated several times by Mr. Sir to emphasise to the boys of Green Lake that they will not be pampered during their stay. Towards the end of the book, we are informed that Green Lake will be converted into a Girl Scout camp. This is highly ironic and suggests that Green Lake is entering a new, kinder era (a change also emphasized by the change in the weather).

## "Camp Green Lake"

The name "Green Lake" evokes images of lush trees and water, but the place itself is actually a desert. The name harks back to a better time. The irony of this misnaming is heightened by its effect on Stanley. He imagines a beautiful lake where he and his fellow campers will learn to water ski and swim, and instead he is presented with the opposite, although he tries to keep up the facade in his letters to his mother.

## "I respect you Stanley."

Pendanski, a supposed psychologist, makes it clear to Stanley that he will be respected as an individual. However, within minutes, he ridicules Zero for his supposed lack of intelligence, leading one to believe that the campers are not actually respected. This is confirmed later in the novel, when Pendanski destroys Zero's records and then stands by when Stanley and Zero are surrounded by lethal lizards, unwilling to do anything to save them.

## The Mary Lou

Sam's boat causes his demise as he is unable to keep up with the faster steamboat owned by Trout Walker. However, the sunken boat ends up saving Zero, who resembles Sam in several ways, when Zero is able to take shelter from the hot sun under the boat, and eat the spiced peaches stored in it.

## "Excuse me."

This statement, spoken several times by the Warden, is generally taken to be a courteous interruption in common speech. When the Warden says it, however, it is a declaration of authority over those around her. She is not asking to be excused, she is asking that her interlocutor acknowledge her superior authority and power.

**Holes Imagery**

## Hands

Sachar is surprisingly descriptive when it comes to hands. He makes it a point to describe the open blisters that appear on Stanley’s hands when he first arrives, and the callouses which later form. The imagery around hands not only helps us empathize with Stanley, but it is symbolic of Stanley himself. He is “soft” when he first arrives, but camp toughens him.

Zero's hands are also described. When he helps Stanley up the mountain using his shovel, there are "deep gashes" on both of his palms (166). This imagery underscores the connection between the boys, and the loyalty and trust that has developed between them.

## Dirt

Dirt is the great equalizer in this novel, at least among the boys. They try to make hierarchies and enforce a social order, but at the end of the day they are all forced to do the same menial task, day after day. The dirt, which is the physical manifestation of the hard labor they perform, minimizes the differences between the boys - at least in Stanley's eyes. Sachar's narration tells us that "Stanley was thankful that there were no racial problems. X-Ray, Armpit, and Zero were black. He, Squid, and ZigZag were white. Magnet was Hispanic. On the lake they were all the same reddish brown color – the color of dirt." Annette Wannamaker writes that "Stanley is portrayed as a naive white boy who is oblivious to racism and the 'racial problems' that exist, whether he is aware of them or not." In any case, dirt is an important recurring image in the novel, underscoring the hard work that the boys do in the inhospitable setting of Camp Green Lake.

## God's Thumb

Imagery becomes very important when Stanley and Zero make it to the top of God’s Thumb. The shape of the rock has significance since it encourages the boys on from afar, telling them that everything will be "thumbs-up" when they finally make it there. Indeed, God's Thumb is the place where Stanley and Zero manage to survive against all odds, and strengthen the bond between them. The descriptions of the grass brook, the onion field, and even the shade of the rock formation help form the concept of an oasis in the middle of a desert - a magical place that is steeped in both historical and present-day significance.

# Holes Fairy Tale Elements

Fairy tales differ across cultures, but almost every society in the world has shared folk tales or folklore passed down from generation to generation. Present-day readers in the USA will have Disneyfied fairy tales as part of their cultural background, many of which came from the Brothers Grimm or Charles Perrault and the European fairy tale tradition. [Louis Sachar](https://www.gradesaver.com/author/louis-sachar) draws on elements that can be attributed to part of this tradition, imbuing the characters and the setting of Holes with fairy tale tropes. In this way, he connects his modern novel to a much longer tradition, emphasizes the importance of inheritance and passing down stories across history, and engages the reader in a magical story with an otherwise impossibly happy ending.

The characters of the novel can be seen to "fulfill archetypal roles," writes Laura Nicosia. This is certainly true when we look at [Madame Zeroni](https://www.gradesaver.com/holes/study-guide/character-list#madame-zeroni) as a fairy godmother (although she turns into something of a wicked witch when she curses the Yelnats family), and Stanley as the hero with a pure heart who must go on a quest (across the desert and up God's Thumb) to break his family's curse. Nicosia also sees Kate Barlow as an example of the archetype of the "wronged woman" who seeks revenge for her lover's death. Sachar's allusion to these traditional fairy tale roles allows his readers to categorize the characters in their minds and understand the schema of the novel.

In addition to characters that fill well-defined traditional roles, magic is also present in Holes. Pat Pinsent refers to the "magic objects and formulae" of the novel, and Laura Nicosia has also paid attention to the "magic animals" and "magical potion[s] or spell[s]" in the novel. The magic animals, Nicosia claims, are the yellow-spotted lizards, who are inconceivably lethal and plague the characters' imaginations throughout the whole book - they can only be warded off by the "magic potion" of [Sam](https://www.gradesaver.com/holes/study-guide/character-list#sam)'s onions. Kissin' Kate's peaches and [Stanley Yelnats III](https://www.gradesaver.com/holes/study-guide/character-list#stanley-yelnats-iii)'s anti-odor solution, "Sploosh," are two more examples of magic potions. The song that Madame Zeroni passes down to her descendants and [Elya Yelnats](https://www.gradesaver.com/holes/study-guide/character-list" \l "elya-yelnats) passes down to his is an important example of a formula that can have magical effects (strengthening whoever drinks from the mountain stream), and eventually help to break the curse on the Yelnats family. Nicosia points out that the most important fairy tale element in Holes is "the presence of the two curses (the one levied against Elya and his descendants, the other against [Trout Walker](https://www.gradesaver.com/holes/study-guide/character-list#trout-walker) and his descendants)." Such curses don't operate as neatly or as simply in real life, if they exist at all, but their presence in the novel makes the conflict much easier to resolve.

Pat Pinsent's analysis of Holes through the lens of the traditional fairy tale examines how elements of fairy tales are mixed with the grittier realism of the present-day characters' lives at Camp Green Lake. The effect is a realistic, relatable, and ultimately uplifting story. In particular, Pinsent attempts to explain how Sachar manages to pull off the fairly unrealistic ending without swerving into unsatisfying cliche by blending both realism and fantasy. The fairy tale elements make Holes accessible because readers already have the tools, developed from long exposure to fairy tales, to understand the characters and the ordeals they must go through to find redemption.

# Holes Literary Elements

## Genre

Adventure, mystery, folk tale, fairy tale, realism, adolescent fiction

## Setting and Context

1) Modern day: Camp Green Lake, a juvenile correctional facility in Texas. 2) 110 years ago: Green Lake, a town in the location of the modern-day camp. 3) Over 100 years ago: Latvia.

## Narrator and Point of View

The novel uses an omniscient, third-person narrator, who spends a lot of time in Stanley's mind but necessarily is omniscient in the sense that he can flip back and forward through time, space, and different characters' consciousnesses.

Laura Nicosia writes that this "third person limited omniscient narrative voice" allows the reader to know "all that the protagonist and focal lens, Stanley, knows" - in other words, we have almost unlimited access to what Stanley feels and experiences. "Beyond that," she writes "the reader gleans through the narrator’s offerings, the history of the Yelnats curse and an awareness of fate’s and coincidence’s roles in Stanley’s life—elements to which even Stanley never becomes fully aware." The reader knows more than Stanley does, thanks to the interjections of the narrator and our exposure to other storylines in the past, of which Stanley is only dimly aware, if at all. Nicosia calls this an "authorial privileging of the reader through the embedded and layered use of fairy and folk tales" which are "counterpoint narratives" in the novel.

## Tone and Mood

Parts of this novel display fairly gritty realism. We learn soberly and sadly about Zero's difficult past through his conversations with Stanley on God's Thumb, and we struggle along with Stanley as he experiences exhaustion, blisters, and endless thirst. The flashbacks to Green Lake are light in tone at first, as we are presented an idyllic town where a lovely couple falls in love, but this narrative quickly turns tragic with the death of Sam.

The tone of the novel is, in accordance with its younger audience, frequently humorous and even hilarious. The fairytale elements can be quite whimsical - notably the Elya Yelnats story, which involves a one-legged old wise woman and two fat pigs. The boys are also funny, in both their nicknames and their occasionally light-hearted banter (e.g. their discussion of whether or not the Warden is watching them in the shower). Sachar wants to show that even in the most dire situations, people can and should laugh at themselves and their predicaments.

## Protagonist and Antagonist

In the modern narrative of Camp Green Lake, Stanley Yelnats is the protagonist and the Warden is the antagonist. In the past narrative of Green Lake, Sam and Kate are the protagonists and Trout Walker is the antagonist.

## Major Conflict

The major conflicts in the present-day narrative are Stanley's sentencing to labor at Camp Green Lake, as well as the unresolved family curse of the Yelnats family. There is also the question of Stanley and Zero's survival in the desert, and Stanley claiming the treasure that belonged to his great-grandfather. Stanley isn't aware that he can do anything to change the family curse, and breaks it accidentally; he also does not feel he has any control over the length of his sentence at Camp Green Lake. While these two issues weigh heavy on the mind of the reader and have a huge impact on the end of the novel, the main conflicts in the novel are those between the boys and the desert, and the boys and the Warden.

## Climax

The climax of the story comes when Stanley and Zero find the Yelnats family fortune and are caught by the Warden. There is much at stake in this scene - the boys' lives are in danger from both the lizards and from the Warden herself, and both Stanley and the Warden are desperate to claim the treasure for themselves. Interestingly, this standoff drags on so long that it loses its dramatic tension, which builds again quickly when Stanley's lawyer and the Attorney General arrive at Camp Green Lake. Now Stanley's freedom is at stake as well as his life, as are the jobs of all the camp counselors.

## Foreshadowing

The flashbacks to the past narratives often act as foreshadowing for the events in the present-day Camp Green Lake timeline. The central foreshadowing has to do with the curse on the Yelnats family. Stanley Yelnats I, who was robbed by Kissin' Kate Barlow, said he took refuge on God's Thumb, which - as soon as we learn that there is a mountain that looks like a thumb near Camp Green Lake - foreshadows Stanley IV's own journey up the mountain. This ascent by Stanley Yelnats IV up God's Thumb with Zero in tow (we already know his last name is Zeroni) is foreshadowed by Elya Yelnat's trip up the mountain in Lithuania. The breaking of the curse is foreshadowed in the casting of the curse. When Elya Yelnats arrived in America, he spent a lot of time looking for Madame Zeroni's son and descendants, which foreshadows when a character called Zeroni is introduced in Stanley IV's storyline. We know that the curse will be broken by Stanley and Hector, standing in for their great-great-grandfather and great-great-great-grandmother respectively.

## Understatement

Pendanski's warning - "Do not upset the Warden" - can be seen as an understatement. The Warden is far more dangerous and vindictive than Stanley expects, especially when she smacks Mr. Sir across the face with rattlesnake venom, or when she welcomes the death of the boys in the hole.

Another example of understatement occurs in Chapter 1, when the narrator writes, "If you don't bother [rattlesnakes and scorpions], they won't bother you" (4). The word "bother" is an understatement, as we tend to think of it meaning a mild inconvenience or annoyance. However, if a rattlesnake or scorpion bites you, you will experience much more than a mild annoyance: Barfbag, who was in D tent before Stanley arrived, had to be hospitalized for an extended period of time because of his rattlesnake bite.

## Allusions

The mountain which Stanley and Zero climb, "God's Thumb," can be seen as an allusion to certain Biblical events which involve mountains. For example, Moses climbing Mount Sinai to meet with God. Religious references always occur in the context of saving in this novel: the nurse who helped cure Stanley Yelnats I is described as an "angel," and Stanley and Zero take refuge on "God's Thumb." While all of Green Lake used to be a paradise in Sam's time, after Sam's death the area became cursed (punished by God) and heaven became limited to God's Thumb.

## Imagery

Much of the imagery in the novel is related to the setting: the now-barren, but once-beautiful Green Lake. Sachar makes a point to contrast the environmental conditions of Green Lake before and after Sam is shot, drawing a causal connection between that heinous murder and the deterioration of Green Lake. The Green Lake of the present-day narrative is a barren wasteland, devoid of water, plants, or any form of life aside from lizards and scorpions. This is in stark contrast with the Green Lake of the 1890s, which was described as "heaven on earth," a lush valley full of plant life and a cool lake in the center. Sachar illustrates both of these settings vividly for the reader through similes comparing the former lake to an emerald, for example, or describing the "haze of heat and dirt" that floats above the "hard, dry earth" of present-day Green Lake (65).

## Paradox

Pendanski makes a point to let the boys of Green Lake know he respects them and thinks they deserve a second chance in life. However, his open ridicule of Zero reveals a paradox of his nature, undermining his false attempts to connect with the boys. Mr. Pendanski is more of a hypocrite than a counsellor.

## Parallelism

A parallel is drawn between "God's Thumb" and the mountain Elya Yelnats climbs, which allows the reader to understand that by Stanley carrying Zero up God's Thumb, he fulfills Elya's promise to carry Madame Zeroni up the mountain. Nicosia has written, "Holes is a complex present day fairy tale that frames a distant past fairy tale and a near past folk legend," and we can see how crucial it is that a parallel is drawn between the events in Lithuania and the events in present-day Texas. Without this parallel, the curse could not be broken.

## Metonymy and Synecdoche

For the Yelnats family, the phrase "the family curse" stands in for everything bad that happens in their life; the "curse" itself referring to the misdeed of a distant relative.

In the first chapter, Sachar writes, "The Warden owns the shade" (3). She is in control over all the luxuries and privileges at Camp Green Lake, not just the shade, although the shade is one of the symbols of her status and coveted by those who must suffer under the hot sun. The Warden also becomes representative for the entire authority hierarchy of the camp. When the boys of D tent fear "the Warden" coming down hard on them, they are referring to the threat of punishment from any authority figure. Similarly, the yellow-spotted lizards represent all the danger of the desert, and turn into evil creatures of quasi-mythological proportions.

## Personification

The personifying name "God's Thumb" turns a stark mountain into a haven of salvation and favor by referring to a mountain as a part of a human body. This draws the important connection between God's Thumb and life - it is the only life-giving place in the area.

Sam also personifies his donkey, Mary Lou, by giving her a clearly human name (as opposed to "Smokey" or another typical animal name). He treats her with respect, as if she were a human, speaking to her and calling her name. The human name confuses Stanley and Zero later in the novel, as they assume the boat they discover must have been named after a woman who "looked great in a bathing suit" (161).

**Style**

**Point of View**

*Holes*is a story told in the third-person point of view. That means that the voice telling the story sees everything and knows all the action. It's as if they are watching and narrating everything from above. This viewpoint is helpful because we can see all the action of the boys, the Warden, and the camp counselors. Neither Stanley nor Hector is telling the story through their own viewpoint. (Notice that no one says, "I grabbed my shovel and started digging my hole for the day.")

The third-person point of view is often referred to as the omniscient point of view, meaning that the narrator of the story sees everything. This is especially apparent in the telling of the story of Camp Green Lake during Sam and Katherine's time. A character in the modern-day story simply couldn't know this information, and it's important to recognize that Stanley and Zero don't know this background information either. One of the things that makes reading this book so much fun is seeing how the pieces of the old and the new story fit together - an advantage that Stanley doesn't have.

**Setting**

The primary setting of the story is Camp Green Lake. The majority of the novel takes part at the modern-day camp, a place beside a dry and barren lakebed. The camp is in the middle of the desert where nothing exists except dust, rattlesnakes, scorpions, and lizards, and where it hasn't rained for more than 100 years. The only two trees and shade on the whole place are owned by the Warden and forbidden to anyone else.

The present-day Camp Green Lake is a sharp contrast to the place that existed 110 years ago. Then it was a beautiful, thriving community settled on the shores of a sparkling lake. The town began to deteriorate when the townspeople committed a wrong, killing Sam, the onion man, and his faithful donkey, Mary Lou, and arresting Katherine Barlow.

The other setting occurs at the end of the book when we see a Super-Bowl Party taking place at Stanley's new home. There are lots of adults around, with great food including champagne for the grown-ups and ice-cream sundaes for the boys. It's prosperous and pleasant, a definite contrast from the home of Stanley's description, smelly and drab with the family being on the edge of eviction.

**Language and Meaning**

The language of the book is simple and easy to understand. The boys talk as boys of their age would talk, including assigning each other nicknames. Nothing is hard to understand about the vocabulary or speech. However, it is important to note that an undercurrent of cruelty comes through in the language of the Warden and the two counselors. The Warden may speak softly and make it sound nice, but her intent is anything but pleasant. The Warden doesn't scream or cuss, but her meanness is clear when she scratches Mr. Sir's face with her rattlesnake-nail polish and says softly, "I don't especially care about your sunflower seeds." Mr. Sir's language reflects his idea that the boys should have to work really hard by adding a sarcastic phrase, "this isn't the Girl Scouts, you know." Mr. Pendanski doesn't even mask his feelings about Zero and uses hurtful words saying, "You might as well teach this shovel to read."

**Structure**

There are fifty chapters in *Holes.* Part I of the book is entitled, "You Are Entering Camp Green Lake," and consists of twenty-nine chapters. The story floats between three ideas - Stanley's predicament and experiences at the camp, the descriptions and stories about the yellow-spotted lizards, and the story of Camp Green Lake from 110 years before.

The second part of the book is entitled "The Last Hole," and extends from chapter 30 to Chapter 49. Again, the book switches between old history and new history, and the reader begins to see the connections between them. The stories about the lizards, the onions, Stanley's great-grandfather, Kissing Kate Barlow, and Madame Zeroni all are tied together.

The final part of the novel consists of just one chapter, Chapter 50. This chapter is called, "Filling in the Holes." Here, the author explains all the little details that bring us to the final Super Bowl Party, details like how much the treasure was worth, what Zero and Stanley did with their money, and how Clyde Livingston came to be sitting in Stanley's living room. The final chapter ties everything together and leaves the reader with a sense of completion.