the daisy chain

by charlotte m yonge · Language: EN

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Overview

Charlotte M. Yonge's "The Daisy Chain" chronicles the lives and moral development of the large, intellectual May family, particularly focusing on the unconventional Ethel May. Set in the mid-19th century, the novel explores themes of duty, self-sacrifice, education, and the practical application of High Church Anglican principles within a domestic sphere. The story begins by introducing Dr. May, a country doctor, and his eleven children, portraying their lively and intellectually stimulating home life in the fictional town of Stoneborough. A pivotal tragedy strikes early in the narrative with the death of Mrs. May and the crippling of young Daisy, which profoundly impacts the family and sets the stage for their subsequent struggles and growth.

The central narrative arc follows Ethel, a brilliant but plain and awkward girl, as she navigates her intellectual ambitions and her deep sense of family duty. Despite her academic prowess, Ethel grapples with her role as a woman in Victorian society, ultimately dedicating herself to the family and to the ambitious project of building a cathedral school for the poor. The novel meticulously details the daily lives, moral dilemmas, and spiritual journeys of the various May siblings, including the earnest Norman, who becomes a missionary, and the wayward Harry, who struggles with discipline. Through their individual and collective experiences, Yonge champions the idea that true Christian living involves active service, intellectual rigor, and unwavering commitment to one's community and family, making the book a significant example of Victorian domestic and religious fiction.

Key Takeaways

- Embrace intellectual curiosity and a love for learning, even if it sets you apart from societal norms.
- Recognize that true service often involves self-sacrifice and dedication to the well-being of others.
- Understand that family bonds are a source of both challenge and profound support throughout life's trials.
- Cultivate a strong moral compass and strive for personal integrity, even when faced with temptation or difficulty.
- Find purpose in contributing to your community, whether through formal projects or daily acts of kindness.

• Accept that personal growth often emerges from adversity and the patient endurance of hardship.

• Balance personal aspirations with the responsibilities you owe to your family and wider society.

Chapter Summaries

Chapters 1-3: The May Family and a Sudden Tragedy

The novel introduces the large, intellectual, and High Church May family of Stoneborough, headed by Dr. Richard May and his gentle wife. Their many children include the studious and awkward Ethel, the beautiful Margaret, the serious Norman, and the wild Tom. The family is preparing for a picnic when a carriage accident occurs, severely injuring Mrs. May and leaving her paralyzed. This sudden event casts a shadow over their happy home, forcing the children to confront grief and responsibility. Dr. May is devastated, and the family's routine is irrevocably altered, setting the stage for their future struggles and growth and highlighting the fragility of their domestic bliss.

Chapters 4-7: Grief, Responsibility, and Ethel's Aspirations

Following the accident, Mrs. May's health deteriorates, and she eventually dies, leaving Dr. May a widower and the children motherless. Margaret takes on the role of housekeeper, while Ethel, despite her grief, continues her intense classical studies, often neglecting domestic duties and struggling with her temper and social awkwardness. Her father encourages her intellectual pursuits, seeing her as a companion in learning. The family grapples with their loss, and the younger children, like Daisy and Tom, feel the absence of their mother keenly, leading to various challenges in their upbringing and discipline, particularly for the impulsive Tom.

Chapters 8-11: Margaret's Engagement and Future

The family begins to adjust to life without Mrs. May. Margaret, the eldest daughter, becomes engaged to Mr. Edmund Rivers, a kind and steady clergyman. This engagement brings a mix of joy and apprehension to the family, particularly for Dr. May, who is reluctant to lose another beloved member. Preparations for the wedding begin, and the family discusses the practicalities and emotional impact of Margaret's departure. Ethel observes these developments, contrasting Margaret's domestic future with her own intellectual ambitions, while also beginning to take on more responsibility in the household, albeit reluctantly at first.

Chapters 12-15: Margaret's Wedding and Ethel's Growth

Margaret marries Mr. Rivers in a quiet ceremony, and her departure leaves a significant void in the May household. Ethel, now the eldest daughter at home, is forced to take on more domestic duties, a role she initially struggles with due to her academic focus and lack of practical skills. However, she gradually begins to mature, learning to balance her studies with her

responsibilities to her younger siblings and her father. The family continues its charitable work, particularly in the impoverished district of Cocksmoor, which becomes a central focus for Ethel's burgeoning sense of purpose beyond her books and intellectual pursuits.

Chapters 16-19: Norman at Oxford and Tom's Troubles

Norman, the eldest son, goes off to Oxford, where he excels in his studies and forms friendships, including with Meta Rivers, Edmund's sister. Meanwhile, Tom, the wild and impulsive younger brother, struggles with discipline and academic work, causing concern for Dr. May. Tom's character flaws become more apparent, and his father tries to guide him, but Tom often resists, preferring adventure and less scholarly pursuits. The family's daily life continues, marked by their strong High Church principles and their involvement in the local community, particularly the ongoing efforts to establish a church and school at Cocksmoor, a project dear to Ethel's heart.

Chapters 20-23: The Cocksmoor Project and Family Finances

The ambitious project to build a church and school at Cocksmoor gains momentum, with Ethel becoming deeply involved in fundraising and teaching. This work provides her with a practical outlet for her energies and a sense of mission. The family faces financial strains, as Dr. May's income is stretched by his large family and charitable endeavors. Discussions about economy and the children's future careers become more frequent. Ethel's dedication to Cocksmoor solidifies her character, showing her growing from a purely intellectual girl into a compassionate and active member of her community, guided by her strong faith and sense of duty.

Chapters 24-27: Richard's Return and a Disappointing Engagement

Richard, the second eldest son, returns from India, having made his fortune. He announces his engagement to Blanche, a beautiful but superficial and worldly young woman. The family, particularly Ethel, is disappointed by Richard's choice, finding Blanche's values and manners incompatible with their own High Church and intellectual sensibilities. Dr. May tries to be welcoming, but the contrast between Blanche and the May family's ideals is stark. The engagement highlights the differing paths the May children are taking and the challenges of maintaining family unity amidst diverse personalities and aspirations, causing quiet concern among the family members.

Chapters 28-31: Richard and Blanche's Marriage

Richard and Blanche marry, and their life together further exposes Blanche's shallowness and extravagance. She struggles to adapt to the May family's simpler, more principled lifestyle and often causes friction with her materialistic outlook. Ethel, despite her initial reservations, tries to be kind and accommodating, but finds it difficult to connect with Blanche. The marriage serves as a contrast to Margaret's happy union and underscores the importance of shared values and character in a partnership, reinforcing the May family's core beliefs about duty, faith, and intellectual pursuits over worldly gain, and causing ongoing tension within the family.

Chapters 32-35: Tom's Recklessness and Dr. May's Burden

Tom's behavior becomes increasingly reckless and troublesome. He falls in with a bad crowd, incurs debts, and neglects his studies, causing immense worry and distress to Dr. May. Ethel tries to intervene and guide her brother, but Tom's impulsiveness often overrides his good intentions. Dr. May bears the burden of his son's missteps, struggling to balance his love for Tom with his duty to instill discipline and moral uprightness. These chapters highlight the challenges of raising a large family and the profound impact one child's struggles can have on the entire household, testing Dr. May's patience and faith.

Chapters 36-39: Tom's Crisis and Redemption

Tom's troubles culminate in a serious crisis involving debt and potential disgrace. Dr. May is forced to confront the full extent of Tom's recklessness, leading to a profound and painful confrontation. Tom, finally realizing the gravity of his actions and the pain he has caused, experiences a turning point. He decides to leave for sea, seeking a fresh start and a chance to prove himself worthy. This decision, though difficult for the family, offers hope for Tom's redemption and marks a significant step in his journey towards maturity and responsibility, guided by his father's unwavering love and principles.

Chapters 40-43: Cocksmoor's Completion and Ethel's Dedication

The Cocksmoor church and school are finally completed and consecrated, a triumph for the May family and the community, largely due to Ethel's tireless efforts. Ethel dedicates herself fully to the work there, teaching and ministering to the poor, finding deep fulfillment in her service. These chapters showcase her transformation from a bookish, awkward girl into a capable, compassionate, and spiritually mature woman. The Cocksmoor project stands as a testament to the family's High Church ideals and their commitment to practical Christian charity, embodying the "aspirations" of the novel's subtitle and Ethel's personal growth.

Chapters 44-46: Norman's Ordination and Future

Norman returns from Oxford, having completed his studies with distinction. He is ordained as a clergyman, fulfilling his long-held vocation. His relationship with Meta Rivers deepens, leading to their engagement. This union brings joy and stability to the family, contrasting with Richard's less harmonious marriage. Norman's path represents a successful integration of intellectual pursuit and spiritual calling, reflecting the values instilled by Dr. May. The family looks forward to his future ministry, seeing him as a worthy successor to their father's principled life and a beacon of their family's High Church values.

Chapters 47-48: The Future of the May Family

The final chapters bring the various threads of the May family's story to a conclusion. Ethel, now a mature and respected figure, remains at home, dedicated to her father, her siblings, and her work at Cocksmoor. While she never marries, her life is rich with purpose and love, embodying a

different kind of fulfillment than her married siblings. The novel reflects on the growth and development of all the May children, their successes and struggles, and the enduring strength of their family bonds and shared faith. It concludes with a sense of peace and the continued "aspirations" of the family for spiritual and moral excellence, demonstrating the lasting impact of their upbringing.

Themes

- Duty and self-sacrifice
- Intellectual development
- Family bonds
- Christian service
- Victorian womanhood
- Moral growth

Notable Quotes

- "The May family was a daisy chain, each link holding fast to the next, and all bound together by the strong love of their father." — A description of the close-knit and interdependent nature of the large May family, emphasizing their unity and paternal bond.
- "It is not what we gain, but what we give, that makes us rich." — Reflecting the novel's central theme of self-sacrifice and service as the path to true fulfillment and spiritual wealth.
- "Ethel, with all her cleverness, was still a very awkward girl, and had a way of tumbling over things." — Describing Ethel May's characteristic clumsiness, which contrasts with her intellectual brilliance and often leads to humorous or endearing moments.
- "Duty is a very stern thing, but it is also a very beautiful one." — A reflection on the often challenging but ultimately rewarding nature of fulfilling one's responsibilities, a core tenet of the May family's philosophy.
- "There are some people who seem to be always doing good, without ever seeming to try." — A commentary on the natural benevolence and selfless character of certain individuals, likely referring to characters like Margaret or Dr. May.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the daisy chain about?

"The Daisy Chain" is about the large, intellectual May family in Victorian England, focusing on their daily lives, moral development, and commitment to Christian duty. It particularly follows Ethel May, a brilliant but unconventional daughter, as she navigates her intellectual ambitions, family responsibilities, and the establishment of a cathedral school for the poor, all against a

backdrop of domestic joys and sorrows.

Is the daisy chain worth reading?

Yes, "The Daisy Chain" is worth reading for those interested in Victorian domestic fiction, the High Church movement, and character-driven narratives. It offers a detailed portrayal of family life, intellectual pursuits, and moral dilemmas of the era. Yonge's meticulous character development and exploration of duty and service provide a rich and thought-provoking reading experience, though its length and didactic tone may not appeal to all modern readers.

How does the daisy chain end?

Spoiler: The novel ends with the May family having matured and found their respective vocations. Ethel, though unmarried, achieves fulfillment through her intellectual pursuits and her dedicated work on the cathedral school, which is successfully established. Norman is a missionary, Margaret is happily married, and even Harry has found a path to redemption. The family remains a strong, interconnected unit, embodying a legacy of faith, service, and intellectual endeavor, with the younger generation beginning to take up their roles.

Who should read the daisy chain?

Readers who enjoy classic Victorian literature, particularly domestic novels and those with strong religious or moral undertones, will appreciate "The Daisy Chain." It's ideal for those interested in the social history of the period, the role of women, education, and the High Church movement. Fans of authors like Jane Austen or George Eliot (though Yonge is more didactic) might also find it engaging.

How long does it take to read the daisy chain?

Given its substantial length, typically around 700-800 pages, reading "The Daisy Chain" would likely take approximately 14-16 hours for an average reader. This estimate is based on a reading speed of about 250 words per minute, though individual reading paces may vary.

Questions & Answers

What is the central premise of "The Daisy Chain"?

The novel follows the large May family, particularly focusing on the intellectual and unconventional Ethel May, as they navigate life, faith, and duty in a Victorian rectory. It explores themes of education, self-sacrifice, family bonds, and Christian service, culminating in their collective effort to build a new cathedral in their community of Stoneborough.

Who is Ethel May and what is her primary struggle?

Ethel May is the third daughter of Dr. May, known for her exceptional intellect and academic aptitude, which is unusual for a girl in her era. Her primary struggle is reconciling her intellectual

ambitions and desire for knowledge with societal expectations for women, her domestic duties, and her deep sense of Christian humility and service. She often feels awkward and misunderstood.

What significant event happens to Margaret May early in the novel?

Early in the novel, Margaret May, the eldest and most beautiful daughter, suffers a severe fall from her horse. This accident leaves her permanently disabled and confined to a wheelchair. This event profoundly impacts the entire May family, forcing them to adjust their lives and responsibilities, and it becomes a catalyst for much of the subsequent family development and self-sacrifice.

What does the title "The Daisy Chain" symbolize?

The title "The Daisy Chain" symbolizes the interconnectedness of the May family members and their collective efforts in doing good deeds, often small and seemingly insignificant, which together form a strong, beautiful, and continuous chain of service and love. It represents the idea that individual acts of duty and self-sacrifice link together to create a greater good within their community and family.

Who is Dr. May and what is his role in the family and community?

Dr. May is the patriarch of the large May family, a respected clergyman, and a physician in the town of Stoneborough. He is a man of deep faith, learning, and strong principles, who guides his children with a firm but loving hand. He is dedicated to his parish and community, embodying the ideals of Christian service and intellectual pursuit, and he initiates the ambitious project of building a new cathedral.

What is the significance of the Stoneborough Cathedral project?

The Stoneborough Cathedral project is a long-term, ambitious undertaking initiated by Dr. May. It serves as a central unifying goal for the May family and the community, symbolizing their collective faith, dedication, and desire to create a lasting legacy. It represents the tangible manifestation of their spiritual aspirations and their commitment to Christian service and community building.

How does Ethel's relationship with Dr. May evolve throughout the book?

Ethel's relationship with her father, Dr. May, is central. Initially, she struggles to meet his expectations and often feels inadequate despite her intellect. As she matures, Dr. May recognizes and encourages her intellectual gifts, guiding her studies. Their bond deepens through shared intellectual pursuits and mutual respect, with Ethel eventually becoming his invaluable assistant and intellectual companion, especially after Margaret's accident.

What role does Norman May play in the family?

Norman May is the eldest son and a clergyman. He embodies the traditional path of Christian service and responsibility. He is steady, dutiful, and a source of moral support and guidance for his younger siblings, particularly after their mother's death. He eventually takes on a significant pastoral role, reflecting the family's commitment to the Church.

How does the novel address the role of women in Victorian society?

The novel addresses the role of women through characters like Ethel and Margaret. It explores the tension between intellectual pursuits and domestic duties, showing Ethel's struggle to find a meaningful path that integrates her intellect with her Christian calling. While valuing domesticity and self-sacrifice, it also subtly advocates for women's intellectual development within a framework of service and family.

What is the main theme of Christian duty and self-sacrifice in the book?

Christian duty and self-sacrifice are pervasive themes. Characters like Margaret, Ethel, and Dr. May consistently prioritize the needs of others and their spiritual obligations over personal desires. Margaret's patient endurance of her disability, Ethel's dedication to her father and studies for the good of the family, and Dr. May's tireless work exemplify the novel's emphasis on selfless service as a path to spiritual fulfillment.

Who is Richard May and what is his career path?

Richard May is one of the May sons who chooses a career in the navy. His path contrasts with his brothers' more academic or clerical pursuits. He represents a more adventurous spirit within the family, though he remains deeply connected to his family and their values. His experiences at sea provide a different perspective on duty and service.

What happens to the May family after Mrs. May's death?

Mrs. May's death is a significant turning point, leaving a void in the large family. Margaret, despite her disability, steps up to manage the household with Ethel's assistance. The children are forced to take on greater responsibilities, and their bonds of mutual support strengthen. Dr. May relies heavily on his daughters, particularly Ethel, for companionship and intellectual partnership.

How does Ethel's education differ from that of other girls of her time?

Ethel's education is highly unusual for a Victorian girl. Instead of focusing solely on accomplishments and domestic skills, she is encouraged by her father to pursue classical languages, mathematics, and theology, often studying alongside her brothers. This rigorous intellectual training sets her apart and prepares her for a life of scholarly assistance and deep theological understanding.

What is the significance of the May family's strong faith?

The May family's strong Anglican faith is the bedrock of their lives, guiding their decisions, shaping their characters, and providing comfort in times of sorrow. It underpins their sense of duty, their commitment to service, and their moral compass. Their faith is not merely theoretical but actively lived out in their daily interactions and community involvement, particularly through the Church.

Spoiler: How does the novel conclude for Ethel May?

Spoiler: The novel concludes with Ethel May finding her true vocation and purpose. She dedicates her life to scholarship and service, becoming her father's intellectual companion and assistant, particularly in his work on the cathedral and theological studies. She does not marry, but rather embraces a life of intellectual and spiritual fulfillment within her family and community, embodying a new model of female intellectual contribution.

What lesson can readers learn from the May family's approach to adversity?

Readers can learn the importance of resilience, faith, and mutual support in the face of adversity. The May family sustains numerous challenges, including illness, death, and personal struggles, but they consistently meet these with unwavering faith, a strong sense of duty, and deep familial love. Their example shows how collective strength and Christian principles can help overcome life's difficulties.

How does the character of Daisy May contribute to the family dynamic?

Daisy May, the youngest daughter, brings a touch of youthful innocence and cheerfulness to the family. She is often seen as the "pet" and represents the simpler, more conventional aspects of childhood. Her presence provides a contrast to Ethel's intellectual intensity and Margaret's quiet suffering, reminding the family of joy and the continuity of life.

What is the role of the community of Stoneborough in the novel?

Stoneborough is more than just a setting; it's an integral character in the novel. It's the community where the May family lives, serves, and interacts with various social strata. The building of the cathedral is a community-wide effort, and the May family's pastoral duties and social engagements are deeply intertwined with the lives and needs of the people of Stoneborough.

How does the novel explore the concept of "vocation"?

The novel explores vocation through the varied paths of the May children. It shows that vocation isn't limited to traditional clerical roles but can encompass intellectual pursuits (Ethel), domestic management (Margaret), military service (Richard), and medical careers (Harry). The underlying message is that any path, when pursued with dedication, faith, and a spirit of service, can be a true calling from God.

What is the significance of the May family's large size?

The May family's large size is crucial to the novel's themes. It creates a dynamic environment of constant interaction, mutual support, and shared responsibilities. It allows for a diverse range of characters and vocations, illustrating different ways to live a Christian life. The sheer number of children also emphasizes the challenges and joys of Victorian family life and the importance of collective effort.