Study Guide for

*They Tell Me of a Home*

*They Tell Me Of A Home* centers around the life of Thomas Lee Tyson, the protagonist who leaves home at 18, vowing never to return. However, as fate would have it, he finds himself back in Swamp Creek, Arkansas, 10 years and a Ph.D. later. In the interim, he sent no cards, made no phone calls, and came home for no holidays. He could be dead, for all his family knows. Yet age has a way of making one realize the importance of family—a lesson T.L. learns expensively.

He arrives unannounced on a hot July afternoon and catches his family off guard. His brother Willie James is plowing the field, as usual, and stops when he sees his little brother walking down the road. He shares sarcastic comments, making it clear that T.L. should have at least communicated during his 10 year hiatus and T.L.’s embarrassment convinces him that his return is not going to be easy.
As he approaches home, he sees his mother hanging clothes on the clothes line and dares to sneak up on her. However, she evidences no surprise—in fact; she has nothing but contempt for T.L. Indeed, all the members of his family treat him with scorn and disgust, yet readers soon learn that their behavior is rooted in jealousy and self-contempt.

Ms. Caroline Swinton, his childhood mentor and school teacher, lies on her deathbed when T.L. returns, and she asks him the unthinkable—to become the next schoolmaster of the local one-room school for rural black kids. T.L. refuses vehemently, and Ms. Swinton dies unsure of the future of education in Swamp Creek.

Many truths come to light during T.L.’s one-week visit home and the novel surrounds his discovery of those truths and what he chooses to do with them. The death of his baby sister is the trauma which disturbs him most, and when no one divulges the truth of how she died, T.L. becomes outraged. He eventually unearths all the details, however, and confirms within himself that he can never live in Swamp Creek again.

By the end of the novel, T.L.’s relationship with his family is transformed, his perception of education is overhauled, and his appreciation for Black rural life is tripled. They Tell Me Of A Home is a novel one won’t soon forget.

**Questions to think about**

1. Why is “home” sometimes a painful place?
2. Why does the community keep the secret of TL’s maternity from him?
3. What type of education occurs at the Meeting Tree?
4. What do readers learn about the Tyson family from the family reunion chapter?
5. What does the storytelling tradition add to the aesthetic value of this novel?
6. Why does TL return after ten years?
7. What does the recurring motif of the butterfly symbolize?
8. Explain TL’s definition of a “teacher.”
9. Is it logical that TL gets off the bus at the end?
10. What does TL realize about himself and his family during his stay at home?
11. How does Daddy transform by the end of the novel?
12. Why don’t readers suspect Willie James to be the father of Sister’s baby?
13. Is TL and George’s intimacy typical of male relationships in America?
14. Why does Ms. Swinton leave TL her books?
15. What makes TL get off the bus at the end of the novel?