

Questions on “The Thing in the Forest” by A.S. Byatt:

1. Traditional fairy tales often rely on symbolic objects, actions, settings or characters. How is “The Thing in the Forest” like a fairy tale in this respect? How is it different? Are these figures of speech in this story that you would argue are not symbolic?
2. Is the “loathly Worm” (par.44) supernatural, imaginary, or real? Notice the description of its appearances. Can you identify different kinds of literal or physical traits that people see in it? Can you identify three or more concepts, feelings, or historical conditions that it might represent? Is it personified? Does it resemble other monsters in literature, art or media?
3. Are “Penny” and “Primrose” allegorical names? How do the differences between the characters add to the symbolic meaning of the Thing? How do their different actions in the story help reveal its meanings?
4. What happens to Penny and Primrose after they return to their homes? How do those later experiences shape their lives? How does the experience in the forest affect Penny and Primrose as adults?
5. What do you make of the end of the story? Have Penny and Primrose resolved any of their questions related to the “thing” in the forest? How has each woman individually dealt with her memory of the event?
6. What do you think happened to Alys? How did the girls treat Alys? Why do you think Byatt included the scene with Alys in the story?
7. In what ways is the story realistic? In what ways is it fantastic? How does this blended effect relate to the themes of the story?