

# The Prescott Girls — Discussion Questions (Teachers)

## Discussion Questions with examples from the book

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Each section below corresponds to a group of chapters. Questions are supported with direct quotes from the text to guide discussion. Students should answer in their own words rather than quoting directly.

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### 1. Leaving New Sharon

#### Chapters 1–2: Sandy River; Leaving New Sharon

*The story begins with loss and uncertainty as the family prepares to leave the only home the girls have known.*

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#### 1. Based on Beckie’s words, what circumstances are forcing the family to leave?

- “We could not come to meet you until the packing was finished.”
  - “Our uncles arrive tomorrow. The journey to Dresden will take us three days.”
  - “The house is to be sold off to pay Father’s debts.”
  - “The courts made a reckoning, like sums at school. They decided our home must be sold to make the numbers come out right.”
- 

#### 2. How do the girls begin to wrestle with the idea of fairness in this situation?

- “The house is to be sold off to pay Father’s debts.”
  - “The courts made a reckoning, like sums at school. They decided our home must be sold to make the numbers come out right.”
  - “That does not seem fair,” Hannah said softly.
-

### **3. In what ways do the sisters each respond differently before departure?**

- “Louisa’s face was wet with tears, and her friends held her as she sobbed.”
  - “Sallie waded in the water, her shoes off, mud between her toes...”
  - Beckie “kept a careful watch as her sister Sallie waded in the water...”
- 

### **4. What shows how the house has changed after Father’s death?**

- “The house in New Sharon stood nearly empty.”
  - “Only echoes lingered in its corners...”
  - “The floors creaked in ways that had once felt familiar, but now sounded strange...”
- 

### **5. How do Mother and Grandfather Samuel Prescott respond differently to the situation?**

- “These debts... were not debts my daughters and I took on, but we carry the costs.”
  - “My son, your husband, signed the notes... And the court requires they be honored.”
  - “No,” Mother replied. “But it is finished.”
- 

### **6. What actions show how Mother chooses to leave the house behind?**

- “She did not turn toward the house again.”
  - “She walked steadily to the waiting wagon.”
- 

### **7. How is the presence of friends and neighbors shown as the family departs?**

- “At the gate, a few neighbors and friends waited quietly.”
  - “For Dresden,” Hannah said simply...
  - “Flower seeds for your new home.”
- 

### **8. What moment shows a shift toward hope or looking ahead?**

- “Will there be flowers where we are going?”
- “If not, we will plant some.”

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## 2. The Road to Dresden

### Chapters 3–4: The Long Road; The Wheel and the Hill

*As the family travels, each girl responds differently to discomfort, danger, and the unknown ahead.*

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#### 1. How is the start of the journey and its conditions on the road described?

- “The second morning on the road began long before the sun crested the trees.”
  - “Dew still clung to the tall grasses that lined the road.”
  - “The hay Uncle William had brought was nearly gone...”
- 

#### 2. What do the girls’ behavior and thoughts suggest about their emotional state during the journey?

- “Louisa didn’t seem to notice. She had barely spoken that morning...”
  - “Beckie wondered if Louisa, too, was thinking of New Sharon...”
  - “There wasn’t much to say to that.”
- 

#### 3. What do the girls’ questions reveal about what they are thinking and wondering about their new life?

- “Will we sleep outside again tonight?”
  - “Will there be other children at the courthouse?”
  - “Will we have to sleep in the same room?”
  - “Will we see the courtroom?”
- 

#### 4. How does the family begin to find a rhythm as they travel?

- “The family stretched and passed around a cloth-wrapped bundle of bread and cheese.”
  - “For the next few miles, the family sang together to pass the time.”
  - “The girls leaned against one another, lulled by the rhythm of the wheels...”
-

## **5. What shows that Sallie notices something is wrong before anyone else?**

- “Then Sallie noticed a feeling, like something off in the rhythm of the road.”
  - “One of the rear wheels had a wobble.”
  - “No one else had noticed the wobble. Not yet. But Sallie had.”
- 

## **6. What events lead Uncle William to stop the wagon?**

- “It is wobbling. The wheel. The back one on this side.”
  - “Uncle William!” she called. “Please stop the wagon!”
  - “Uncle William gave a short whistle to the horses, slowing them.”
- 

## **7. What shows how serious the problem with the wheel is?**

- “A soft crack split the air.”
  - “A fine break had begun to open.”
  - “Another few miles and we might have lost the wheel altogether.”
- 

## **8. How is the courthouse introduced as the family sees it for the first time?**

- “The trees parted, and the hill rose before them...”
- “That... is the Pownalborough Court House.”
- “The building stood on the top of the hill, tall and square and painted a sensible white.”
- “They watched as Uncle Thomas opened the front door, and for the first time, they stepped inside.”

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## 3. Entering a New World

**Chapters 5–8: The Pownalborough Court House; Sallie and the Old Fort; The Locked Cabinet; A Place to Call Home**

*The girls enter an unfamiliar space and begin to understand what it means to live there.*

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### 1. How do the girls react upon first entering the courthouse?

- “The old courthouse looked huge from the outside, but once inside seemed even bigger.”
  - “This room alone was nearly as large as their entire house in New Sharon.”
  - “The girls had never lived in a house with stairs before...”
- 

### 2. What shows how the house begins to feel less strange to the girls?

- “They realized that the house no longer felt quite so strange.”
  - “It still felt different and big, but perhaps not as scary as they had thought.”
- 

### 3. How does Sallie’s attention to nature shape her sense of belonging?

- “Sallie began to feel at home in a way the others did not.”
  - “She wandered the grounds each morning with quiet wonder...”
  - “She spoke little, but her eyes read the stories...”
- 

### 4. What does Sallie discover about the history of the place?

- “the courthouse was built on the grounds of old Fort Shirley...”
  - “Your great-grandfather commanded the fort.”
  - “I remember him, Major Samuel Goodwin.”
- 

### 5. How does Beckie approach solving the mystery of the locked cabinet?

- “She found a locked cabinet built into the wall.”

- “Beckie started trying all the keys from the box...”
  - “She was able to open and close the lock with just the bent hairpin.”
  - “Have you tried using two hairpins at the same time?”
- 

## **6. What is discovered inside the cabinet, and why is it meaningful?**

- “Inside the cabinet was a carefully kept collection.”
  - “Neatly folded on top was a judge’s robe.”
  - “an ornate gavel...”
  - “William Blackstone’s Commentaries on the Law of England.”
  - “Is the court now in session?”
- 

## **7. What shows how Louisa finally begins to feel at home?**

- “Louisa remained quiet, her spirit a little dimmed.”
- “Inside were... a needlework sampler bearing her mother’s name...”
- “I thought these were lost...”
- “So, in the quiet room... Louisa began to read aloud.”
- “the courthouse slowly became something else...”
- “finally the old courthouse became their home.”

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## 4. Work, Study, and New Ideas

**Chapters 9–12: Stitches Before the Sunset; A Letter from Philadelphia; The Sugar Question; The Unexpected Guest**

*Daily routines begin to form, and new ideas from beyond Maine begin to influence the girls' thinking.*

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### 1. What shows that Beckie is beginning to take her needlework seriously and wants it to have meaning?

- “Beckie sat near the window with her embroidery sampler in her lap.”
  - “Each letter took care and patience. Each line mattered.”
  - “Not yet. I want it to mean something.”
- 

### 2. What shows how each of the girls is learning and growing in different ways?

- “Louisa sat cross-legged nearby, sorting buttons into tidy rows...”
  - “Her own sampler would come later, once her stitches were steadier.”
  - “Sallie... had spent the day following Beckie and Louisa to school.”
  - “practice her numbers... as long as she did not interrupt.”
- 

### 3. What happens when the letter from Philadelphia arrives, and why is it important to the girls?

- “It is the mail coach!” Louisa called out
  - “All the way from Philadelphia.”
  - “The girls gathered on the rug before the fire...”
  - “The room fell quiet for a moment after Beckie folded the letter.”
- 

### 4. What new ideas does Hannah introduce in her letter?

- “we must all be witnesses, even the young.”
- “Our family will be boycotting sugar from states where slavery is permitted...”

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## **5. How do the girls begin to think differently after hearing Hannah's ideas?**

- "I wonder what we would do... If we were bold like Hannah."
- "something quiet and strong, taking root between them."

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## **6. What decision do the girls make about sugar, and what does it reveal about their character?**

- "Then we should not use sugar anymore. Not if we know."
- "That is a decision worth making together."
- "If we believe this is wrong, should we not say so?"
- "Then let your words be true. And let them be your own."

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## **7. How does Mrs. Price's visit deepen the girls' understanding of courage and action?**

- "I learned that grief can be unfinished, that freedom is fragile..."
- "fear is not the end of the story."
- "I could no longer pretend that standing still was the same as helping."
- "People helping others on their journey north."
- "conscience sometimes requires us to speak."

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# 5. Speaking and Being Heard

Chapters 13–17: Voices Raised; Three Letters to Philadelphia; The Sermon; The Tavern Below; A Visitor from Vassalboro

*The girls begin to express their ideas, and their voices enter into a wider conversation.*

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## 1. What shows Beckie’s decision to speak, even though she is unsure?

- “She told herself to stay still, but her thoughts were louder than the silence.”
  - “Then Beckie stood, almost before she thought about it.”
  - “Her voice trembled at first, but held.”
- 

## 2. What do the girls say when they stand and speak, and how do their voices differ?

- “I will not eat sugar made from the suffering of slaves...”
  - “Testimony is not only spoken, it is lived.”
  - “I want to make a difference, too.”
  - “We are young, but we know what is right.”
  - “Me, too.”
- 

## 3. How do others respond when the girls speak?

- “The room remained hushed, attentive.”
  - “Those are powerful words. Insight that is rare even in adults.”
  - “words far wiser than your years.”
  - “That was grace.”
- 

## 4. What shows that the girls’ words are not just spoken, but shared and carried beyond that moment?

- “We will write Hannah back... All of us.”
- “Not just what we believe, but what we have said aloud.”
- “three young voices had been written into the world”

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## **5. What happens when the girls are asked to speak again in front of the entire congregation?**

- “He then asked Beckie, Louisa, and Sallie to stand...”
- “suddenly aware of the eyes upon them.”
- “she would no longer use sugar that came from plantations...”
- “sometimes it can take the words of the young to change the minds of the adults”

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## **6. What shows that not everyone agrees with their ideas?**

- “abolitionists and fools in the same breath.”
- “Every man has the right to make use of the land...”
- “whether your comfort is worth another man’s chains.”
- “You cannot change a man’s mind in one night.”

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## **7. In what ways do their voices reach beyond their immediate community?**

- “Word of their speaking... reached all the way to Vassalboro.”
- “your names were spoken with admiration.”
- “I brought something for thee.”
- “It was written to educate people who would rather not think about slavery.”
- “the youngest among us often carry the clearest sense of what is just.”

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## 6. Community, Custom, and Conviction

Chapters 18–20: Apple Day; A Quaker Wedding; News from Philadelphia

*The girls observe how values are lived out in their community and begin to form their own convictions.*

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### 1. How does shared work bring the family together?

- “The press had been hauled into the yard just after breakfast...”
  - “Louisa had declared herself in charge of inspecting apples...”
  - “Sallie wandered between the baskets...”
  - “A large harvest needs many hands.”
- 

### 2. How do the girls begin to connect their daily work to larger ideas about choices and responsibility?

- “Do you think other people stop and think... about where their sugar comes from...”
  - “Do we have to think about everything?”
  - “I do not think we have to... But I think we are choosing to.”
- 

### 3. What does Beckie begin to understand about how change happens?

- “change seems to come so slowly, like the harvest, one apple at a time.”
  - “And few do it alone.”
- 

### 4. What do the girls notice about how the Quaker wedding is different from what they are used to?

- “There was also no pulpit...”
  - “No hymns or sermons, only silent reflection.”
  - “The room was quiet for what felt like a long time.”
-

## **5. What values are shown in the Quaker wedding ceremony and traditions?**

- “In the presence of God and these our friends...”
  - “promising... to be... a loving and faithful wife.”
  - “All three of you honor us... I welcome you to sign as well.”
  - “girls may speak when they feel called to share”
- 

## **6. What do the girls begin to imagine about their own futures and choices?**

- “If I marry... I want a wedding in the fall...”
  - “a husband who does not mind if I... speak my mind at church.”
  - “She wondered if those words might belong to her...”
- 

## **7. What new understanding do the girls gain from Hannah’s latest letter?**

- “Not all agreed it was proper for young people to speak.”
- “what is proper and what is necessary are not always the same.”
- “even those born free must carry papers...”
- “What will I do about it?”

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# 7. Secrets, School, and Conscience

**Chapters 21–24: Louisa’s Secret; At the School House; The Classroom Reckoning; The Ribbon and the Loom**

*Private struggles and public discussions bring questions of fairness and responsibility into sharper focus.*

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## 1. What does Louisa discover in the attic, and why does it disturb her?

- “Rec’d of Mr. Samuel Goodwin... for attending his Negro Slave Andrew...”
  - “Was this a person who had been owned, like cattle?”
  - “she dropped them where she had found them, as if they were hot coals.”
- 

## 2. What does Uncle Thomas help Louisa understand about the past and her responsibility?

- “The choices of those who came before us shape the world we inherit.”
  - “You did not cause this, and you cannot undo it alone.”
  - “But every word you speak and every stand you take shapes what comes next.”
- 

## 3. Why does Louisa choose to keep the secret from her sisters?

- “She would not tell her sisters about Andrew.”
  - “She did not want to dim their light with a shadow from the past.”
  - “She believed silence would keep the hurt from spreading.”
  - “She did not realize that secrets rarely stay buried for long.”
- 

## 4. What questions do the girls raise at school about trade and slavery?

- “Then are we not all helping the South grow rich from slavery?”
  - “But much of it is.”
  - “Then what good is a conscience... if we set it aside when things are difficult?”
  - “We will treat it with respect and read it with open minds.”
-

## **5. How do the girls present their ideas to the class, and what do they ask others to consider?**

- “The foundation of all rights... is denied to the slave.”
  - “what right have we... while we persevere in denying the same... to our fellow-men?”
  - “That is why we have stopped using cane sugar.”
  - “But we can use maple sugar. It is sweeter when it is fair.”
- 

## **6. How does Louisa reveal the truth about her family, and what does she learn from doing so?**

- “Yes, our great-grandfather kept a slave.”
  - “I found a receipt in our attic. His name was Andrew.”
  - “You cannot hide from the past. Hiding does not make it go away.”
  - “If we want slavery to end, we must speak against it.”
  - “I apologize for not telling you.”
- 

## **7. How do the girls begin to live out their beliefs in their daily choices?**

- “Who made these? How? And under what conditions?”
- “If even one of those hands belongs to an enslaved person... the cloth carries the stain of slavery.”
- “Free-Labor Cotton.”
- “It looks the same, but it is not.”
- “what they choose tells a story too.”

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## 8. Winter, Memory, and Endurance

**Chapters 25–29: A Letter from Father; Company for the Holidays; Christmas Day; Winter Market; The Nor'easter**

*The family faces hardship and reflection during the winter months, drawing strength from memory and community.*

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### 1. What does the letter from their father reveal, and why does it matter to Beckie?

- “Speak only when your words carry truth...”
  - “never mistake silence for peace.”
  - “you will feel steady in your bones.”
  - “She had spoken rightly... she had felt it.”
- 

### 2. How does the family respond emotionally to receiving the letter?

- “She pressed her lips together and looked out the window...”
  - “It meant a difficult emotion was being held in place...”
  - “Do you think he would be proud of us?”
  - “He was always proud of you girls...”
- 

### 3. What shows how the arrival of family brings warmth and life into the home?

- “the house felt fuller for it.”
  - “voices filling the rooms.”
  - “They gathered... so that all might be seated together.”
  - “the girls listened wide-eyed, not wishing the evening to end.”
- 

### 4. How do the girls experience both joy and the absence of their father on Christmas Day?

- “Christmas is not Christmas without Father.”
- “Christmas comes with the light... and the smell of gingerbread.”

- “All four girls were beaming...”
  - “For unto us a child is born...”
- 

## **5. What do the girls learn about work, independence, and responsibility at the winter market?**

- “This is for work done, and learning how work is done.”
  - “This was the first time she had her own money.”
  - “listing everything she hoped to see...”
  - “she meant to take it all in slowly.”
- 

## **6. How does Beckie make a deliberate choice based on her beliefs at the market?**

- “Her mouth watered, but she knew they were made with sugar.”
  - “I will take some candles.”
  - “she felt a quiet contentment...”
  - “we can make the right choice.”
- 

## **7. What does the storm reveal about endurance, community, and life during winter?**

- “Sending children out into the storm... was not an option.”
- “the children would be spending the night.”
- “the storm raged for that day and the next two...”
- “the children saw it as a great adventure.”
- “after a few runs... each run was a little faster and longer...”

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# 9. Memory, Loss, and Continuity

## Chapter 30: Packing Winter Away

*The girls reflect on their father's memory and begin to understand how loss can become part of who they are.*

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### 1. What does the task of packing winter away reveal about the changing season and mood?

- “the room smelled of cedar and old wool”
  - “the earth had softened”
  - “the stuffy corners needed to breathe after the long winter”
  - “the ground is waking up.”
- 

### 2. How does Sallie's search for matching items reflect her way of understanding the world?

- “Everything ought to have its mate.”
  - “Do you think the match to this one is hiding somewhere?”
  - “I will keep looking.”
- 

### 3. What begins to bring their father's memory into the moment?

- “This one was his... Father's. I remember.”
  - “do you remember him more than we do?”
  - “I remember a little.”
- 

### 4. How do the girls each remember their father differently?

- “I remember his boots... Big muddy ones...”
  - “I remember his coat...”
  - “I do not remember his voice.”
  - “It was quiet... just thoughtful.”
-

## **5. What do they learn about who their father was and how he lived?**

- “He said teaching was the most useful kind of ministry.”
  - “Every visit...”
  - “he brought us back a bunch of dandelion greens...”
- 

## **6. What do they come to understand about how their father died and the choice he made?**

- “He was trying to help someone...”
  - “He crossed safely and helped the man...”
  - “the ice was thinnest... It cracked under him...”
  - “He did. But he could not save himself.”
- 

## **7. How do the girls begin to carry their father’s memory forward in their own lives?**

- “I am going to fix this one... For when it is cold again.”
- “I will be the one who finds the first greens. I will bring them in like he did.”
- “Then we will be ready for whatever weather comes.”

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# 10. Return and Belonging

## Chapters 31–33: A Visit from Hannah; The Gathering; Family Ties

*Relationships reconnect and deepen, bringing the story to a quiet but meaningful resolution.*

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### 1. How does Hannah’s return show both change and continuity?

- “She had grown an inch, maybe two...”
  - “a new confidence in her voice that still felt familiar.”
  - “She has changed.”
  - “So have we.”
- 

### 2. What does Hannah help the girls understand about how people live out their values differently?

- “even among abolitionists, we do not all act the same.”
  - “The values guide us, but no one forces the pace.”
  - “Some will avoid it; others... still serve tea with two lumps of sugar.”
- 

### 3. What confirms for Beckie that speaking from conscience matters, even without approval?

- “thee spoke from thy conscience, not for approval.”
  - “That is what matters.”
  - “it made me ask harder questions...”
- 

### 4. How does the gathering reflect shared values within the community?

- “a gathering to thank those who had encouraged them...”
  - “Hospitality and conscience can share a table.”
  - “every dish must reflect their values.”
- 

### 5. How do others respond to the girls’ choices and example?

- “Children from school rushed around tasting the sugar-free dishes...”
  - “Not a spoonful.”
  - “nodding his approval with a smile.”
- 

## **6. What do the girls begin to understand about how ideas grow and spread?**

- “conscience, once stirred, doesn’t sit still.”
  - “It reaches outward.”
  - “It gathers others.”
- 

## **7. How does the final gathering and Beckie’s sampler show that the girls’ journey is continuing?**

- “I wanted something important that spoke to me and my conscience.”
- “The words are golden, and living them is our reward.”
- “She had spoken. She had stitched.”
- “the thread she’d chosen to follow held firm to this very day.”