

The Prescott Girls — Discussion Questions (Teachers)

Discussion Questions with examples from the book

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.

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.

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.”
-

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.

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.”

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.

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.”

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.

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...”
-

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."

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."

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."

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.

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”
-

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”
-

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.”
-

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.”

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.

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?”

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.

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.”

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.

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...”

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.

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.”

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.

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.”