

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Deerslayer by James Fenimore Cooper

Book Information

James Fenimore Cooper, The Deerslayer
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This novel, set in the American wilderness, is a tribute to the noble pioneer spirit in conflict with encroaching society.

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Main Characters

Chingachgook Deerslayer's Indian friend, who is in love with Hist

Deerslayer the main character, who is a frontiersman and lives by the principle of truth

Hetty the "slow-witted" sister of Judith

Hist an Indian woman who loves Chingachgook and has been kidnapped by the Huron tribe

Hurry Harry the frontiersman who introduced Deerslayer to Tom Hutter

Judith a beautiful woman who falls in love with Deerslayer

Tom Hutter the man who is, at first, thought to be the father of Judith and Hetty

Vocabulary

brocade an expensive cloth woven with raised designs on it

gallant a man who is very polite and attentive to women

grapnel a small anchor with three or more hooks

reveille a signal on a bugle or drum to waken soldiers or sailors in the morning

scow a large, flat-bottomed boat

sheering turning from a course

shoal a place in a sea, lake, or stream where the water is shallow

sobriquet a nickname

sortie a sudden rushing forth of troops from a besieged fort, town, or castle

viands articles of choice food

wampum beads made from shells, used by Indians as money and for ornament

Synopsis

This story opens with Hurry and Deerslayer traveling to Glimmerglass. Hurry wishes to see Judith, and Deerslayer intends to meet his friend, Chingachgook. Along the way, Hurry tells Deerslayer of Judith and Hetty. Judith is a beautiful girl who loves finery and has had many suitors. Hetty is Judith's sister. She is slow-witted but morally pure.

Hurry and Deerslayer find Tom, Judith, and Hetty in the ark, a flat-bottomed boat in which they sometimes live. Tom is worried because he has daughters to protect against Indians. They plan on going to the castle, a house he built in the middle of water to better protect themselves. On the way to the castle, they are attacked by Indians and forced to fight.

Tom and Hurry decide to go into the Indian camp. They want to take scalps and collect a bounty for them. When they attempt to take scalps, they are taken prisoner, and Deerslayer is forced to kill his first man.

Deerslayer meets Chingachgook on the rock. Chingachgook is in love with Hist, a girl who has been kidnapped by a Huron tribe. He and Deerslayer plan on rescuing her from the tribe.

When Hetty learns her father and Hurry have been captured, she decides to attempt a rescue. She plans on going into camp and reading the Bible to

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the Indians.

Meanwhile, Judith plans on rescuing her father and Hurry by giving the Indians a ransom. To this end, she opens a family chest. In this chest she finds a brocade dress and chess pieces. She and Deerslayer successfully use elephant chess pieces to ransom Tom and Hurry.

Deerslayer and Chingachgook go into the Huron camp to rescue Hist. Deerslayer is captured, but Hist and Chingachgook escape.

The Indians once again try to capture Tom and Hurry. They break into the castle and wait. When Tom and Hurry enter the castle, Tom is scalped and Hurry must escape by rolling into the ark. Before Tom dies, he tells Judith that he is not her real father. Judith is relieved at this news because she feels it is no longer her duty to love him.

After Tom dies, Hurry asks Judith to marry him. She refuses him, and he plans to leave.

Deerslayer, out on furlough from his captivity, has messages for his friends. The Hurons want Hist to come back and Judith and Hetty to come into their tribe. They refuse to give in to the Hurons' demands.

Judith, along with Deerslayer, once again open the chest. This time she hopes to find out who her real father was. She is unable to find out his name, however, because it has been erased or cut out of all the letters in the chest.

Deerslayer feels he must return from his furlough even though he knows he will face torture and death. He has given his word to return, and he feels he should not lie. Before he goes back, Judith tries to make her love for him known. He misunderstands her words.

When Deerslayer returns to the Hurons, he is asked to marry Sumac, the widow of the warrior he killed. He refuses to marry her. Panther, her brother, is upset with Deerslayer and throws a tomahawk at him. Deerslayer catches the tomahawk and kills

Panther by throwing it back at him.

Deerslayer is now tied up, and his nerves are tested. Hurons throw tomahawks as close to his head as possible without touching him. Deerslayer shows himself to be brave, and the Hurons are impressed.

Judith comes into the Indian camp dressed in finery. She pretends to be a great lady and tries to rescue Deerslayer. Her plan falls through when Hetty truthfully says that Judith is her sister, not a noble lady.

After Judith's plan fails, the Hurons prepare things for Deerslayer's torture. Both Hist and Chingachgook attempt to rescue Deerslayer. Hist tries to pass a knife to him, and Chingachgook cuts him free and gives him a gun. Before heavy fighting begins, however, they are rescued by the king's troops. In the confusion that ensues, Hetty is mortally wounded. She dies and is buried beside her mother in the lake.

Judith now plainly asks Deerslayer to marry her. He refuses her because he does not love her as a husband should love a wife.

The story ends with Chingachgook, his son, and Deerslayer revisiting the lake fifteen years later. The castle is in ruin, but the lake is unchanged.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

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Initial Understanding

In chapter eighteen, Judith tells Hetty, "I more dread Deerslayer's truth than any enemy!" What do you think she means by this?

While Judith has had some experience with men and courtship, she has never met a man who combines honesty and goodness as Deerslayer's character combines them. His judgment upon her character would not be one that Judith could dismiss. She does not reveal to Hetty in this scene that she hopes to wed Deerslayer, but the dread to which she refers pertains to both the possibility of his rejecting her as a bride and, equally importantly, the fact that his reasons will no doubt be just.

Literary Analysis

Before every chapter, there is a short quotation or poem from a great author. Why do you think the author did this?

Each quotation helps set the scene for its chapter. The epigraphs may foreshadow an event or color the mood in Cooper's own narrative. With their widely varied classical references, they also help place the leatherstocking tales of frontier America on an equal footing with the great works of European literature.

Inferential Comprehension

In chapter twenty-one, we read of Tom Hutter being "buried" beside his wife. Judith does not want him "quite so near" to where her mother lies. It is never fully explained as to why she feels this way. Why do you think she does not want Tom and her mother close together in death?

Judith's discovery that Hutter is not her real father only confirms her long-standing suspicions. She sees her mother as a kind, educated, and virtuous person, while Hutter lacks refinement and conscience. It is unfitting in her eyes for the two, who should never have been joined in life, to be forever united in death. She never does manage to explain her sense of Hutter's true nature to Hetty, but Judith's will is obeyed in the matter as Hurry is "burying" his friend in the lake.

Constructing Meaning

In chapter thirty-two, Judith asks Deerslayer if anything Hurry had said to him had influenced his feelings for her. His silence was said to be an answer. What do you think his silence told Judith?

Deerslayer does not put his response into words, but Judith can tell what he answers by simply "reading his countenance." The truth she sees there is that Hurry's comments about Judith's past and her egotistical nature have indeed influenced Deerslayer in rejecting her proposal. Cooper describes Judith at that point as having "...a heart nearly broken by the consciousness of undeserving...." Thus, Hurry's words were not merely harmful, but true.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting In this book, Tom Hutter lives in the castle, a house he has built in the lake. The castle and the lake are described in some detail. It might be fun for the students to concretely envision the castle and Glimmerglass. Have them reread the sections describing Glimmerglass and the castle in chapter two. Then have them draw Glimmerglass and the castle as they perceive them to look. Do the students' pictures look similar?

Understanding Hist/Cultural Factors In this book, elephant chess pieces are used to ransom Tom and Hurry. The Indians, never having seen an elephant, are enthralled by the pieces. In chapter sixteen, they discuss the history and habits of such an animal. The students might find it enlightening to do the same. Find a picture of an elephant and show it to the students. Have them pretend they have never seen such an animal. Then have them write a few sentences about the elephant. How might the elephant use its trunk? Why would an elephant have such a tiny tail? How would an elephant's big ears be useful? These ideas might be fun to read in front of class.

Comparing and Contrasting In this book, Tom Hutter is nicknamed "Muskrat." It might be

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interesting for the students to gain a deeper insight as to why this nickname is or is not appropriate. Have the students research the muskrat. What does it eat? Where does it live? What are its habits? Have them list three ways in which Tom Hutter and a muskrat are similar. Then have them list three ways in which Tom Hutter and a muskrat are different. Do they feel the nickname is appropriate for Tom or inappropriate?

Responding to Literature This book has been criticized for its disappointing ending. Deerslayer is saved rather unexpectedly by the king's troops. It might be enjoyable for the students to write a different ending to this story. Have them reread chapter thirty. Then, instead of having the troops rescue Deerslayer, have them write a few paragraphs in which they construct a different rescue. Does Deerslayer and Chingachgook fight the Hurons and win? Does Judith and Hetty outsmart the Hurons? Does Hurry come through as a hero in the end?