

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Last of the Mohicans (Unabridged)

by
James Fenimore Cooper

Book Information

James Fenimore Cooper, The Last of the Mohicans (Unabridged)

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427 Pages

Book Level: 12.0

Interest Level: UG

This classic portrays a man of moral courage who severs all connections with a society whose values he can no longer accept.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Community Life, Ethics/Morality; Community Life, Prejudice; People, Native American; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

Alice Munro the youngest daughter of General Munro, whom Duncan Heyward wishes to marry

Chingachgook an Indian enemy of the Hurons, who becomes the last of the Mohicans

Cora Munro the eldest daughter of General Munro, whom Magua wants to have as his wife

David Gamut a song master who travels with the group

General Munro the English officer in charge of Fort William Henry

Hawk-eye a former military scout who now works on behalf of the Delawares

Magua a Huron chief bent on revenge against General Munro

Major Duncan Heyward a trusted English officer charged with escorting the Munro women to Fort William Henry

Marquis de Montcalm the French officer in charge of the siege against Fort William Henry

Uncas only son of Chingachgook

Vocabulary

capitulation the act of surrendering, especially after agreeing to specified conditions

circumlocution the use of an unnecessarily large number of words to express an idea

despotic acting as a ruler exercising power abusively, oppressively, or tyrannously

miscreant one who behaves criminally or viciously

palliating to ease without curing

succor aid, help, relief

Synopsis

Set in upstate New York during the time of the French and Indian War, the novel begins as Major Duncan Heyward is assigned to escort the daughters of General Munro to Fort William Henry, which is under their father's command. As Indians loyal to the French pose a threat along the main route they follow, Heyward splits off from the road and regiment with an Indian guide as their escort. When the group encounters Hawk-eye, a former military scout for the British, they discover that their guide has purposely misled them. The guide retreats, and Hawk-eye offers Heyward the services of him and his two Indian companions, Chingachgook and Uncas.

They first take shelter in an island cave hidden by waterfalls. Soon they are discovered by the warriors loyal to their former Indian guide, Magua, whose grudge against Munro has shaped a plan to gain revenge by forcing the general's daughter to become his Huron wife. Hawk-eye and his companions must leave Heyward and the women to avoid capture. The scout and his friends subsequently manage to track Magua and rescue their white charges.

Upon successfully leading their group to William Henry, Hawk-eye and the others find the fort is besieged by French forces heavily supported with Huron warriors. When Munro discovers that General Webb has refused in writing to send reinforcements, he accepts the Marquis de Montcalm's generous conditions for surrender, which allow the British to retreat with their colors and arms in exchange for abandoning the post. As the retreat takes place,

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Magua's Huron warriors initiate a massacre, and Munro's daughters are kidnapped once again.

Hawk-eye, Chingachgook, Uncas, Heyward, and Munro set out to find Cora and Alice. Along the way, they evade two Indian attacks and reach the Huron camp. There they learn the women have been separated, and Cora is being held in a separate camp by the Delawares, a people at uneasy truce with the more warlike Hurons.

Hawk-eye and Heyward rescue Alice from the Hurons and make their way to the Delaware Camp. Magua follows them and demands the release of his female captives, a request the Indians' culture forces the Delaware to honor. The Delaware chief agrees to release Cora to Magua, but Uncas promptly takes over his rightful role as the new leader of the Delawares and leads a battle against the retreating Hurons. Magua's force is all but destroyed, and the novel's climax leaves Magua, Uncas, and Cora dead in its wake. Chingachgook thus becomes "the last of the Mohicans," as Hawk-eye pledges never to leave his side.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

In a frank dialogue with Cora, Magua gave her a detailed explanation for the grounds on which he sought revenge against her father. As completely as possible, paraphrase the basis of Magua's feelings from his own point of view.

As a young man, Magua was a happy warrior among the Huron, born to be a chief among them. With the arrival of the whites, however, came trading and the introduction of "firewater" to the Indians. Magua's use of alcohol turned him into such "a rascal," the Hurons drove him from the tribe. At first, he lived on his own, but then whites again drove him away, "forcing" him into the arms of his Mohawk enemies. He blamed his feelings of exile and disenfranchisement on the whites for bringing liquor to the Indians, and he added the loss of his Huron wife, who was given to another chief upon Magua's banishment, to the list of sins against him. General Munro's public humiliation of a drunken Magua by having him whipped was thus, in Magua's view, the last blow in a series of degrading and unjust offenses against him by whites. While Magua held himself utterly innocent of his own, self-admitted villainous behavior, he held Munro utterly responsible for the complete history of treacheries against him.

Literary Analysis

Whose conflict in this story was most crucial to the plot? What was the cause of the conflict?

Magua's conflict with General Munro initiated the novel's action. While serving the British, Magua was humiliated with a military whipping for offensive behavior he committed under the influence of the white man's whiskey. The revenge Magua sought--taking Munro's daughter as his wife--was intended to be as personal as the humiliation Munro caused him.

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Inferential Comprehension

What contrast did Heyward draw between Hawk-eye's "native" principles and his own British soldier's maxim when the Hurons were approaching the cavern hidden by waterfalls?

Hawk-eye, adding up his contingent's lack of fire and manpower, grew fatalistic and prepared himself to accept death. Heyward voiced his preference for the maxim, "while life remains there is hope." On the one hand, his determination to sustain courage and effort fortified the sisters. On the other, Hawk-eye's principles of accepting death were the endgame of a more informed and realistic relationship with life in the wilderness.

Constructing Meaning

Why was Magua such a persuasive orator in his deliberations with the Hurons?

Magua's powers included a fine sense of timing. He knew when to stay silent and when to press his advantage. In the speech persuading the Huron to accept him as the rightful head of their affairs, he was described as blending "...the warlike with the artful, and obvious with the obscure, as to flatter the propensities of both parties..." (p. 334) He had, in other words, a remarkably modern political touch, one that allowed listeners to believe they were hearing what they wished to hear, even when their various wishes were contradictory.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Plot Though the main conflict in this story revolved around Magua's desire for revenge on General Munro, the larger conflict involved the battle between the French and English over control of North America. Have the students research this historical time period and the events that surround it. Have them focus on how the two parties used Indians to aid them in the battle. Discuss what the students discovered.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors When Heyward entered the Huron camp, he noticed the activity of the children. The children seemed to be playing games that resembled hunting. Such

sports helped young Indian children of many cultures learn hunting skills. Find some activities the students could do that resemble the games the children played, such as Blind Eagle, bow and arrow games, etc. Have the students try some of these games and evaluate their effectiveness in teaching hunting skills.

Understanding Sequence This story took place in the vicinity of Lake George in the northern area of New York state, very near the Canadian border. Have the students map out and retrace the path of the storyline. Have them retell the sequence of events that lead the group to the Huron territory. You could also have the students locate the area on a current map and discuss what the terrain was like in the early days of the United States.

Responding to Literature Michael Mann's 1992 film version of *The Last of the Mohicans* takes many liberties with Cooper's plot, for the sake of both concision and a more modern sense of theme. Starring Daniel Day-Lewis, the movie's portrayal of Hawk-eye adds a sexual dimension to the character Cooper took pains to deny. (The film's "R" rating, however, was earned exclusively by its realistic scenes of combat; it does not contain explicit sexuality or profanity.) Magua's motivation for revenge is shifted from personal rancor at Munro's insulting punishment to tribal grief over his family's extermination. Munro himself is posed accordingly as less the sentimental father and much more the martinet. Despite the wholesale revision of the plot and key relationships in the book, the film conveys the epic nature and tragic structure of Cooper's vision boldly and perhaps more rousing than students will perceive it in the tides of Cooper's own language. Watching the film may enhance your students' sympathy with Cooper. Analyzing the dramatic changes Mann chose to make may deepen their understanding of the original. Points of inquiry could include: why did Mann create a love interest between Hawk-eye and Cora? Does Magua's character appear to deepen or become more superficial in the film? Which deletions from the novel did the students regret in the film? Does

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the film do Cooper justice?