

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Education of Little Tree

by Forrest Carter

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The Education of Little Tree

Notes

On the surface this novel is the story of an orphaned Cherokee boy, who is raised in the mountains by his wise Granpa and Granma. In this warm and loving “coming of age” story, Little Tree learns about life, death, and man’s relationship to nature. This sometimes hilarious novel highlights the importance of family and family history to a young boy.

Recent evidence suggests that this novel is not autobiographical. Carter was not a Cherokee Indian, he was not orphaned, and he was not raised by his grandparents. Some critics believe that some of the Cherokee customs and words in the book are also inaccurate. This excellent, entertaining novel must, therefore, be studied as a work of fiction and not as a vehicle for teaching authentic Indian culture. A few instances of profanity also occur in the book.

All references come from the University of New Mexico Press edition of *The Education of Little Tree*, reprinted 1986.

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define vocabulary words from the story.
2. point out examples of the following literary devices:
 - alliteration
 - personification
 - sensory images
 - allusion
 - stereotype
 - simile
 - flat character
 - inference
 - flashback
 - paradox
 - symbolism
 - theme
 - allegory
3. recognize that this is an episodic novel and discuss the extent to which each chapter is a complete story with all five plot elements.
4. point out the incidents in this novel that satirically poke fun at politicians and at religion.
5. discuss the hunting terminology used in this story; include: “dens up,” “hot trail,” “bluffer dog,” “swapping out,” “cheater hound.”
6. point out instances of irony in the story.
7. give the context for the following life lessons Little Tree learns from his grandparents:
 - If a person speaks to you, give that person your full attention.
 - If you find something good, share it with others so the good will spread out.
 - Anything in life that is pleasurable also comes with some kind of pain.
 - A man must rise on his own in the morning.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Define the following vocabulary words from the story. gallery, dogtrot, cache, uppity, covey, haunch, plaited, ingenious.
2. Some critics believe that many chapters in this episodic novel tell separate stories with all five plot elements. Select any chapter in the story and identify the exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution (denouement).
3. Cite three incidents from the story that seems to be poking fun at politicians or at the government. What overall statement about government is Carter making in this novel?
4. State three life lessons Little Tree learns when he goes fox hunting with Granpa.
5. Why is it ironic that the woman in the car calls Granpa and Little Tree “foreigners”? In what way is Little Tree’s interview with the Reverend at the orphanage also an example of irony?
6. Which incident from the story teaches Little Tree to listen to the “tone” of a conversation rather than just to the words a person says? Define the following words and phrases used by mountain folk: “I kin ye,” “law-dogs,” “bust up,” “laying-by,” “jumped teeth.”
7. In what sense is the chapter, *The Farm in the Clearing*, an allegory?
8. What does Little Tree learn about his heritage from the Trail of Tears?
9. Discuss the importance of Little Tree’s secret place to help him develop his “spirit-mind.”
10. Relate Granpa’s rules for planting and the significance of the different species of birds. Discuss whether or not this information is based on facts or on superstitions.
11. Some critics believe the Indians in this story are stereotypical Indian types rather than accurate representatives of Cherokee Indians. Discuss the extent to which you agree with this opinion. Cite incidents from the story to support your answer.
12. Cite three incidents from this story which seem to be “bigger than life” and are more like legends than true accounts.
13. What does Little Tree learn from Mr. Wine? What might the color yellow represent in this story?
14. Cite incidents from the story to prove that this is a “coming of age” story.

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Little Tree

Vocabulary

foot log – a log over a small stream used as a bridge
gullied – moving water that made a small ditch or ravine
plaited – braided
spewed – gushed
tow sack – a sack which is pulled or dragged behind

1. Little Tree is a five-year-old orphan. When the family are discussing who is going to take care of the boy, Little Tree looks over the crowd and sees his Granpa looking at him. He inches over to Granpa and grabs onto his pant leg. Instinctively, Little Tree seems to understand that the best home for him is with Granpa and Granma. Why do you think Granpa stays on the fringes of the group and does not openly invite Little Tree into his home? How does Granpa's behavior contribute the Little Tree's decision to grab onto Granpa's leg?

2. What is Little Tree's reaction when the people on the bus poke fun at Granpa because he is an Indian? What does this incident reveal to the reader about Little Tree's character?

3. Critics applaud Carter for his vivid descriptions of nature in this novel. He uses sensory images and often alliteration in these descriptions. For example, Little Tree describes the night as being "crackling cold." Find another example of a description which utilizes one or both of these literary devices.

4. Why does Granpa's father join with John Hunt Morgan, the Confederate Raider?

5. Briefly describe the marriage stick. Explain its use.

6. Carter often uses descriptions of nature as a metaphor for the characters in the story. Find a passage in this chapter where he describes nature and at the same time is describing Granpa's father.

The Farm in the Clearing

1. Allegory is defined as a story that represents abstract ideas or moral qualities. As such, an allegory has both a literal level and a symbolic level of meaning. Assume that the story about the farm in this chapter is an allegory representing Reconstruction, which is the process that occurred after the Civil War to reorganize the Southern states and reestablish them in the Union. What might each of the following characters in the story represent?

2. What political statement might Carter be making with this allegory? Hint: In the last paragraph the body of the sergeant is clutching a handful of black dirt.

3. What is this chapter, about Granpa's youth, called?
