

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Sign of the Beaver

by Elizabeth George Speare

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The Sign of the Beaver

Notes

This story takes place in the unsettled wilderness of Maine in the year 1768, five years after the end of the French and Indian War. The Native Americans are already leaving the area for the game-filled hunting grounds of the western United States. Their claims to the land, as well as their ancient traditions and customs, are being trampled by the white settlers.

The taking of scalps during the war, by both whites and Native Americans, results in mistrust and hatred between the two races. This story tells us how, through understanding, these racial barriers are overcome by two young boys who first develop trust and then friendship through their shared adventures.

This popular book was written in 1983, when the term “Indian” for Native American was acceptable. To avoid changing every reference to the preferred term, we have decided that to eliminate the author’s word “Indian” completely would damage the integrity of the book. Additionally, some critics point out that some incidents or comments may be stereotypes or contain racial code words for Native Americans. Teachers should be aware of this potential problem and deal with it appropriately.

All references come from the Yearling Newbery Book edition of *The Sign of the Beaver*, copyright 1983.

Objectives

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

1. enjoy the story and recall significant events in the narrative.
2. recognize and point out examples of metaphors in the story.
3. discuss how the author uses allusion to present important themes in the story, specifically the allusions to
 - Robinson Crusoe — It is unnatural for one human to be a slave to another.
 - the Biblical story of Noah and its similarity to the Indian story of Gluskabe — God has different names, but his message is the same everywhere.
4. comment on how the author uses foreshadowing to add interest to the story.
5. define and relate events from the story to illustrate the elements of plot — Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Resolution.
6. contrast the different attitudes of white culture with the Native American culture in the following areas:
 - education
 - women
 - land ownership
 - use of natural resources
7. define first-person narrative and third-person narrative and point out which is used for this story.
8. make inferences about characters and events when the meanings are not explicitly stated.
9. support the idea that this is a “coming-of-age” novel for both boys in the story.
10. state the significance of the title of this novel, *The Sign of the Beaver*, and point out how it relates to the Indian’s respect for the land and other people.
11. cite events from the story to support the following statement as a major theme in this story: Friendship grows from mutual respect, understanding, and tolerance for each other’s differences.
12. identify the main conflicts in the story: conflict with another person; conflict with nature.

Questions for Discussion and Essay

1. What surprises Matt about the Native American story of Gluskabe? How does the story help Matt feel closer to Attean?
2. Give three examples of mistakes Matt makes soon after his father leaves him alone in the wilderness. How does each of these mistakes hurt his chances of survival?
3. How does foreshadowing in the following quotation add interest to the story? “So he was not so quick-witted as he should have been when unexpectedly someone arrived.”
4. There are numerous references to *Robinson Crusoe*. Why does Matt need to skip over some of the story when he reads it to Attean? Compare the relationship of Friday and Crusoe with that of Attean and Matt.
5. This story is rich with details about Native American life. Briefly describe their methods for the following: hunting rabbits, making bows, fishing, blazing a trail.
6. Discuss the role of women in the book. What is Attean’s attitude toward his sister and grandmother? How is it different from Matt’s view of his mother and sister?
7. Attean teaches Matt how to survive. Other than how to read, what does Matt teach Attean?
8. Attean looks for his place as a man by looking for his manitou. What does Matt do in the story to prove he is a man?
9. How could Matt or any other stranger unwittingly start trouble with the Native Americans by not observing the sign of the beaver?
10. At what point in the story does Matt gain Attean’s respect? His grandfather’s? His grandmother’s?
11. Why is Attean’s decision to leave his dog with Matt an act of friendship?
12. What is the importance of each of the following gifts to Matt?
 - a watch
 - snowshoes
 - honey
13. Cite an event in the story to define each of the following plot elements, and explain how the event adds interest to the story:
Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, Resolution.

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CHAPTER ONE

VOCABULARY

blunderbuss – a muzzle-loading gun
puncheon – a split log

1. Why does Matt not go with his father to fetch his mother and sister?

2. What two gifts does his father leave him?

3. What does Matt do to ease the knot in his stomach?

4. At first, Matt thinks marking time by notching sticks is silly. Later, he cannot wait to make the first notch. Why does he change his mind?

CHAPTER SEVEN

VOCABULARY

finicky – fussy, excessively exacting
grudgingly – done unwillingly or reluctantly
heathen – an uncivilized or irreligious person

1. Do you think Matt’s teaching method is effective? Why?

2. What evidence is there that Attean is intelligent?

3. Obviously, Attean does not want to learn to read. Why does he continue his lessons?

4. Why is Matt clearly happy Attean knocks the book from the table?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

VOCABULARY

stoutly – strongly, vigorously

1. Why does Attean's dog not give warning of the danger?

2. How do you know Matt is not aware of the danger when he first sees the cub?

3. Do you think Matt is brave to throw the rabbit at the bear? Why?

4. What is Attean's tribute to Matt?

5. Does Matt think Attean needs forgiveness from the bear for killing it?

6. How do Matt and Attean differ on their definitions of women's work?
