

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Caddie Woodlawn by Carol Ryrie Brink

Book Information

Carol Ryrie Brink, Caddie Woodlawn
Quiz Number: 14
Collier Macmillan, 1970
ISBN 0-02-041880-9; LCCN
242 Pages
Book Level: 6.0
Interest Level: MG

This is a story of a spirited pioneer girl's adventures on the Wisconsin frontier.

Award: Newbery Medal

Topics: History, Frontier/Pioneer Life; Power Lessons AR, Grade 6; Power Lessons Vocabulary, Grades 4-6; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; U.S. States/Regions, Wisconsin

Main Characters

Annabelle Grey the cousin from Boston, whose city ways and overt femininity lead Caddie to consider her own sense of identity

Caddie Woodlawn a pioneer girl who turns twelve and is a tomboy with a heart of gold

Harriet Woodlawn Caddie's spirited mother

Hetty Woodlawn Caddie's younger sister and a hopeless tattletale

John Caddie's Indian friend, a virtuous man who speaks in deeds

John Woodlawn Caddie's noble and honest father

Mr. Tanner known as the "Circuit Rider," or traveling preacher

Tom and Warren Woodlawn Caddie's rough and ready brothers whose wild ways and adventures she shares

Uncle Edmund an annual visitor from St. Louis, who comes to Wisconsin to hunt and play tricks on his nieces and nephews

Vocabulary

abolitionist nineteenth-century term for those who opposed slavery

breeches short pants

clogs shoes, often with wooden soles and worn for dancing

gimcracks objects for show, without practical value

hassocks cushions used for kneeling

sledge British word for sleigh

victuals food; provisions

Synopsis

In the beginning, Caddie Woodlawn is as she is described at the end: a pioneer and an American. These tales of the year she turns twelve take place as the Civil War is ending. The end of Caddie's childhood is set against the background of the frontier's infancy.

The Woodlawns moved to the Wisconsin territory from Boston when most of their seven children were very young. Caddie has grown up in that "wild country" with the freedom to run with her brothers, thanks to her father's idea that such freedom would produce a healthier, happier girlhood. John Woodlawn is both wise and ahead of his time. His experiment (with his wife's consent, if not her approval) has created a strong and rugged daughter who is treated as an equal by her brothers and has developed a mind of her own.

The book's emphasis is on character. Many of the episodes are comic, with Caddie taking pratfalls in the lake, spilling a skirt-full of nuts with company at the table, or battling the school bully blow for blow. Even her father laughs when she secretly "fixes" a watch by herself and makes the gears and springs shoot across the room. Afterwards, however, he teaches her to repair the watch. He then proclaims them "partners." The word fully summarizes Mr. Woodlawn's relationship with Caddie.

Beyond anecdotally poking fun at gender stereotypes and family life, the novel takes aim at some serious themes. The rumor of an Indian uprising leads to fear of a massacre and danger to both sides. Caddie must choose her own moral course in the heat of the hysteria. The racial aspects of the frontier are treated with a sober sensitivity.

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Caddie Woodlawn by Carol Ryrie Brink

Caddie's dilemma as a tomboy also becomes a more serious theme. It unfolds in an unusual way. While the predictable arrival of a feminine foil comes in the form of Cousin Annabelle, their encounter does not follow the predictable jealousy template. Caddie's "call to womanhood" comes from a more independent and internal source. Her father guides her thinking about the role of women and the meaning of being an American to a deeper level, in conversations that are both articulate and accessible to younger readers.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why did Mrs. Woodlawn vote to stay in Wisconsin?

At first, her husband thinks she may have only wanted to please him. But Mrs. Woodlawn says firmly, "I did it all for myself." Having to make a choice made her see more clearly what was important to her. In the end, she did not want to leave a place where all her loved ones were happy. "Home is where you are, Johnny!" she tells her husband. Even Boston, which she has sorely missed throughout the novel, seems less important to her than the thriving family life they have already.

Literary Analysis

What are some hints the author gives that Caddie will finally choose to become more of a "lady"?

Throughout the novel come flashes of Caddie's concern for others. She takes the Hankinson children in hand, for one example, and buys them items a mother might to both cheer and groom them. Where Tom makes a kind of side-show spectacle of John's scalp belt, Caddie thinks of how sick and frightened Katie Hyman has been and uses the belt to help heal her. Even before she is punished, the tricks Tom devises for Annabelle prick her conscience. Reactions like these make it seem more natural for her to accept her father's idea that "A woman's task is to teach [men and boys] gentleness and courtesy and love and kindness."

Inferential Comprehension

How are Uncle Edmund and Mr. Woodlawn alike and different?

Both love children and a good joke. But where Mr. Woodlawn values the time of childhood, Uncle Edmund seems never to have left it. He plays tricks like Tom might, particularly when he makes Caddie's raft fall apart on the lake. He is also shown to be quite childish in the case of taking Nero back to St. Louis. His sister "gives into him," just as she has all their lives, when Edmund takes a notion to teach the sheepdog new tricks. It would be difficult to imagine Mr. Woodlawn making such a mistake about another creature's welfare. When he indulges his children, it is for their good, and not his own amusement.

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Caddie Woodlawn by Carol Ryrie Brink

Constructing Meaning

Why might Caddie remain close to Tom and Warren even after she chooses to learn to do "a woman's work"?

To that point, they had shared all their days and adventures. Caddie was not just tagging along; the respect and closeness were mutual. When Caddie learns to sew, rather than teasing her, the boys become interested. Not only do they take up the needle themselves, but their mother says it won't harm them. The family seems ready to turn Caddie's tomboy experiment around and "free" the boys to follow her example, as she had been following theirs. Nobody expects Caddie to lose her tomboy daring completely.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Late in the novel, Caddie's father tells her, "It is the sisters and wives and mothers, you know, Caddie, who keep the world sweet and beautiful. What a rough world it would be if there were only men and boys in it, doing things in their rough way! A woman's task is to teach them gentleness and courtesy and love and kindness." As a writing or discussion topic, ask students to react to this view of women. Was it common for Nineteenth-Century America? Is it valid now?

Understanding the Author's Craft In her note, the author reveals that the novel was based on the stories a grandmother loved to tell about her own childhood. As a creative writing assignment, ask students to write a short story or tale based on a family story they have heard many times. Like the author, they should feel free to embellish, exaggerate or invent events to make their character or tale more interesting. It might be useful for them to ask, "How were the times when my relative/character was young different from the way things are today"?

Making Predictions The family's decision to forego Mr. Woodlawn's English inheritance was portrayed positively in the novel. Some readers, however, may have regretted missing the chance

to see Caddie move into an English manor. Ask students to write or discuss the changes Caddie might have faced in England. The focus could range from stating general probabilities to concocting whole scenes --- perhaps, of Caddie's first day in the manor, her relationship to servants, or her introduction to an English boarding school.

Responding to Literature Ask students to choose a character from another work of fiction and compare Caddie with their choice. Which character is stronger? More resourceful? Truer? More independent? Funnier? Which would they rather meet? Sample choices include Tom Sawyer, Nancy Drew, Laura Ingalls (*Little House on the Prairie*), Sam Gribbley (*My Side of the Mountain*), and Tom, "The Great Brain," in the novel of the same name.