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The Education of Little Tree

The novel, *The Education of Little Tree*, is a beautifully written story—which portrays the lifestyle of a Native American family—seen through the eyes of a young boy in the Appalachian Mountains, who was orphaned at the age of five.

Following the death of his parents, the eight-year old Indian boy, Little Tree, a half-breed Cherokee orphan, went to live with his Cherokee grandmother and white grandfather (a proud whiskey maker) in a remote cabin home in the Tennessee backwoods. Here, his grandparents will teach him “The Way” of the Cherokee people. They will teach the young boy what real love is, as they love him with all their hearts. Although they are simple people, they will guide the little boy on the right path.

In only one year of his life, Little Tree learns about prejudice, violence and death. But the loving relationships he builds with his grandparents, his friend Willow John, and Mother Earth kept him smiling. His friend, Willow John, an eighty-year old man, will help him return home by persuading the right person.

Little Tree will also learn the importance of self-discovery and the respect for the environment. “Take only what you need. When ye take the deer, do not take the best. Take the smaller and the

slower and then the deer will grow stronger and always give you meat. Pa-koh, the panther, knows and so must ye” (9).

There, in the beautiful Smoky Mountains, he is given a rich and lasting education into the history and culture of his Cherokee ancestors. “If ye don’t know your past, then ye will not have a future. If ye don’t know where your people have been, then ye won’t know where your people are going” (40). He also learns about his grandparent’s history.

He is a very fortunate boy to live with and learn from his wonderful grandparents. They are the ones who will connect the little boy with his ancestors and his family’s history. His grandparents will offer him the best gift possible: a normal childhood, in a normal family.

At his grandparent’s house, Little Tree learns how to “talk” the animals’ language and care for them. He learns about the beauty and importance of Mother Nature and how to work the land—including the ancient secrets on how to obtain the best results for a good crop. He was lucky to be a part of the Nature, as Nature will always be there for him, when people won’t: “...as long as I live I could always come home to them [the trees, the birds, the waters, the rain and the wind], where other children would find their parents gone and would feel lonesome; but I would never be” (144).

His grandparents shape his life, and he develops a beautiful, strong and healthy personality. Little Tree will, one day, grow into a “Big Tree,” lucky to have a great heritage and family who truly cares for him. He is a lucky child whose life is sheltered when he needs it most—right after

his parent's death. The reader laughs and cries with the little boy, happy to see that he's cared for, so he can grow strong and healthy from a "Little Tree" to a mature one.

Little Tree also learns right from wrong. He also learns first hand about the hypocrisy and essential duplicity of man, and how the white man stole the land of his ancestors; also how the Indian people were forced to leave their homeland and move away. Some of them refused to leave and hid in the mountains. But most importantly, he is taught to respect nature. "The Indian never fishes or hunts for sport, only for foodOnly the white man always takes more than he needs!', says his white grandfather who has turned his back on his own heritage to learn the ways of native Indians" (107).

Little Tree will learn to respect Mother Nature and its true spirit—which talks to the Indian people—as he would respect a human being. Mother Nature was the one that helped them survive through difficult times. She was the protector of the ones who embraced her laws. "Folks who laugh and say that all is known about Nature, and the Nature don't have a soul-spirit, have never been in a mountain spring storm. When She's birthing spring, She gets right down to it, tearing at the mountains like a birthing woman clawing at the bed quilts" (102).

It is an idyllic and comfortable existence for Little Tree until government authorities come along and impose their will. The authorities involved in this matter consider that the little boy wasn't receiving the right education and that his grandparents weren't able to offer him an acceptable life style.

Little Tree is forcibly taken away from his grandparents to a state run institution, where a common existence and iron discipline threaten to break his spirit and precious individuality.

Once again, in the tragic history of the Native American, we witness the intent of erasing one's identity and heritage in the name of civilization. In their eyes, "what Cherokee done didn't count none whatsoever" (185). This mentality is pure ethnocentrism coming from the local authorities, and the reader understands why the Indian culture doesn't have a chance of survival. The only hope is that Little Tree's roots and education were strong enough to help him preserve his identity—despite his new lifestyle and the new rules taught to him by the white people.

Unlike other kids, Mother Nature will help him remember his home, as well as maintain an invisible connection with his grandparents and friends. He talks to the oak tree, watches the clouds, the sun and the Dog Star.

Little Tree will return after a while to his home. "... my spirit didn't hurt anymore. I was washed clean by the feeling song of the wind and the trees and the spring branch and the birds" (203). He will continue his destiny, even after his grandparents' death—to be part of the nature of a Native American.

The Education of Little Tree is a beautiful story, and because of it the reader gets closer to understanding and appreciating the Indian heritage—so misunderstood and unprotected from the white man's harm.

Works Cited

Carter, Forest. *The Education of Little Tree*. New Mexico: University of Mexico. 1986.