

“The Girl I Left Behind Me”
Army Officers’ Wives on the Great Plains 1866 -1900

Lesson Plan IV: Army Women and American Indians of the Great Plains

Recommended Grade Level: 8th through 12th

Description: This lesson is designed to help students understand how cultural attitudes can shape human relations resulting in discord among peoples of different races or cultures.

Time Required: About 2-3 class periods.

National History Standards:

- Standard 2: Historical Comprehension
- Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation
- Standard 4: Historical Research Capabilities
- Standard 5: Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-Making

Background: The title of this section refers to the ideas about American Indians which officers’ wives brought with them to the Great Plains. James Fennimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (published in 1826) was one of the most popular novels of the early 19th century. The character Natty Bumppo, represented Anglo-Americans conquering the continent and adapting to its environment and native peoples. The characters Chingachgook and Uncas are fictional characters who represent the last of the vanishing tribe, the Mohicans (Mohicans are a real tribe and today are centered in Wisconsin). Though the Anglo-Americans learn much from American Indians, and often get along with them, Anglo-Americans assume that English language, customs, religion, government, and other aspects of culture will prevail as English Americans move westward.

Objectives:

- Students will learn the power of literature to shape American cultural history
- Students will discuss the differences between historical cultural accuracy and the enhancement of culture in fiction.
- Students will discuss the nature of race and racism
- Students will discuss questions of race and gender and their effect on cultural conflict or cultural empathy.

Preparation:

Students should read the section titled “So Wholly Unlike Cooper’s Indians: Army Women and Plains Indians.” If they have not read *The Last of the Mohicans*, they should read at least Cooper’s Introduction. The novel is available in full text on the internet at several sites including: <http://www.americanliterature.com/LM/LMINDX.HTML> and

<http://www.online-literature.com/cooperj/mohicans/1/>. It may be helpful to have students read the section titled “I Could, I Can, and I Do!: Daily Life in a Great Plains Post” in “The Girl I Left Behind Me.”

Glossary: Teachers may wish to have students become familiar with the following terms either by reading this glossary or by studying these terms in a good dictionary.

Culture: the characteristics of a society including language, religion, literature, music, and art. Many customs such as ways of preparing food, or methods for rearing children are part of a culture, as are the values placed upon each of these characteristics.

Empathy: a sense of understanding for another person’s feelings or thoughts.

Novel: fiction, meaning that the characters, the events, and the setting are made up by the author. Some novels are based on historic events, but the characters, their words, and many events are drawn from the author’s imagination.

Race: a term usually referring to the physical characteristics of an entire group of people (not individuals). For instance, skin color, hair texture and color, eye color, and the shape of the nose, head, eyes, or body height or weight might be used to distinguish a group of people. The term is becoming out-dated, except for its historical use, because ethnicity, or cultural characteristics are now understood to be more important than physical characteristics.

Racism: an idea that is used to characterize an individual or a group of people by associating biological qualities with undesirable social or cultural qualities.

Activity I. Students should read the brief Author’s Introduction to *The Last of the Mohicans* by James Fennimore Cooper.

1. Does Cooper have a strong understanding of Indian culture and history? Is his presentation of American Indians based on facts?

If Cooper was the only source of information a person had on Indians before actually meeting Indians on the Great Plains, would that person be well prepared for a successful and peaceful encounter?

Activity II. Make a chart. Students should use a *pencil* to check the boxes that indicate daily or weekly tasks that Indian women were likely to do. Using a *pen*, students should check the boxes of tasks that Army officers' wives were likely to do.

Tasks	Army Officers' Wives	American Indian Women
Cooking		
Cleaning		
Child care		
Worship		
Socializing with neighbors		
Productive work (including sewing or knitting clothes, tanning hides, procuring and/or preserving food)		
Family health care		
Sending husband off to war		

Activity III. Discussion.

1. How many boxes have two check marks?
2. Does this mean that these two groups of women had much in common?
3. What kind of contact did officers' wives have with Indians?
4. What factors influenced their responses?
5. Why do Army women think that their culture (civilization) is superior to that of the American Indians they met?
6. Do officers' wives memoirs and letters provide modern readers with a good source for understanding 19th century Indians of the Great Plains?
7. What prevented these women from reaching an understanding about each other?
8. Did Army wives empathize with Indians? Does warfare allow for empathetic understanding of the "enemy?"
9. Could women have changed the course of the Plains wars?

Activity IV. Make a Bibliography. Students should check the catalog of their school or city library to see how many books on the history and culture of the Indians of the Great Plains are included in the library collection. The tribes might include Sioux (Lakota, Dakota, etc), Arikara, Mandan, Hidatsa, Chippewa (Ojibwe), Blackfeet, Crow, Comanche, Kiowa, Pawnee, Omaha, Osage, Assiniboine, as well as many others.

To make a bibliography, students can access models (both MLA and Turabian) for bibliographic format at the web sites listed below. Students should be reminded that all bibliographies, no matter which style they use, should be alphabetized by the author's last name.

http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/DocChi_WC_book.html

<http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/tura.html>

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Troy/8866/12biblio.html>

Discussion:

1. How long is your bibliography?
2. Do you think your library has enough sources that you can tell the history of the Great Plains from the point of view of the Indians?
3. Do you think that Indian women would tell the story of the late 19th century on the Plains differently than did the women of the Army?
4. Can you, a modern student of history, have empathy for both the Indians and the Anglo-American Army wives?

