

GIANTS IN THE EARTH

LIVING LITERATURE SERIES

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TEACHER'S SUPPLEMENT

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SYNOPSIS

... Was this the place? . . . Here! . . . Could it be possible? She stole a glance at the others, at the half-completed hut, then turned to look more closely at the group standing around her; and suddenly it struck her that here something was about to go wrong. (p.28)

"Here is the deed to our kingdom, Beret-girl! See to it that you take good care of the papers. . . Isn't it stranger than a fairy tale, that a man can have such things here, just for the taking? . . . Yes—and years after he won the princess, too!"

These above quotations from the first chapters of the novel illustrate the contradictory attitudes which are repeated throughout the book. On one hand there is the character Per Hansa, the adventurous, ever-optimistic Norwegian settler. He is obsessed with the freedom, the opportunity, and the great potential of the unsettled Dakota plains. On the other hand there is Beret, Per Hansa's wife, who he dragged with him out to this so big, so open, so empty country. She fears the land and the isolation—fears being where there is no other human being from here to the end of the world.

The plot of *Giants in the Earth* is a saga of the prairie, a narrative about one Norskie immigrant and his family and their efforts to join the movement of westward expansion in the United States during the last half of the nineteenth century. In addition to Per Hansa and Beret, the members of the family are Ole, the oldest son; Store-Hans, the middle child; and And-Ongen, the young daughter. The story is episodic.

As the story begins, Per Hansa is leading his family out to the prairie country of South Dakota, to an area next to Spring Creek, where his Norwegian friends Hans Olsa, Syvert Tonseten, and the bachelor Solum brothers have recently laid stakes. It is an area of no trees, and so necessarily an area where homes would be only sod huts. The nearest settlement is fifty miles away. However, the land is rich and fertile.

Per Hansa works from dawn to dusk, clearing the

land and building his sod house. Having arrived in the spring of the year, he quickly prepares the land for a first potatoe harvest. The reader witnesses Per Hansa's struggles, watching him gamble on the odds, anticipating that he will suffer some loss or bitter tragedy. But, time after time Per Hansa's luck is with him and his good fortune seems unending.

When Beret realizes that they have settled on land which contains an old Indian burial mound, she perceives it as an ominous sign of impending doom. She is fearful of the land, and believes it is inhabited by trolls, the evil spirits of Scandanavian folklore that bring sickness and injury to people. However, when the passer-by Indians do arrive, Per Hansa meets them and successfully doctors one of them who is sick. Per Hansa wins the respect of the Indians and is given a pony in gratitude for his help.

The first summer goes well. Through his efficiency and hard work Per Hansa is able to prepare well for the oncoming winter. One day as he walks the fields he uncovers claim stakes that are unfamiliar. They bear Irish names. In haste Per Hansa uproots them and burns them. Beret discovers this secret, illegal act and now has more reason to fear some unknown punishment. When the Irish do arrive, and after an initial conflict, it is proven that the Irish have never legally filed claims, and the Norwegians convince the newcomers to settle nearby on the other side of the river.

Just as the reader shares Per Hansa's success and good fortune, so does he share Beret's emotional and mental decline. She becomes more and more withdrawn and melancholy. She is obsessed by scruples and guilt which derive from a variety of causes: (a) In the old country Per Hansa had been a reckless, fun-loving sailor, and he and Beret conceived their first child Ole out of wedlock. (b) Contrary to her parents' wishes, Beret married Per Hansa and followed him to America, leaving behind and rejecting all that had been a part of her. She considers this to be a sin of filial disobedience. (c) In the old country there wasn't a more heinous crime than meddling with other people's landmarks, as Per Hansa had done with the claimstakes of the Irish. (d) During the first winter a son is born into the family and Per Hansa sacrilegiously

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names him Peter the "Victorious"—a name Beret considers reserved only for the deity. All of these scruples drive her to the border of insanity. Whenever Per Hansa goes away for the evening on a trip or to the Tronders settlement for supplies, Beret puts blankets over the windows, believing that she is shutting out the evils that lurk over the prairie. Rolvaag's characterization of Beret is so complex that the reader does not know whether to feel sorry for her or simply to dislike her.

The first winter on the prairie is a particularly hard one. Although the confinement in the sod hut is a restful welcome for Per Hansa, after a while he can no longer cope with the cabin fever. He sets out on a trip to obtain firewood, and almost loses his life in the cold. However, as luck or Providence determines, he turns his misfortune into success as he begins to bargain with the Indians for furs. Per Hansa cannot help but find ways to succeed in situations that seem destined to lead to failure. He has been lucky with crops, his animals, the Indians, other settlers, and now he has survived a winter tragedy. His luck continues as he prematurely sows wheat in the spring. During the same week that he sows the seed, there is a snowstorm and killing frost. Somehow his wheat survives and over the next few years, as more settlers arrive, Per Hansa trades more and more.

Later that summer the prairie is plagued by grasshoppers. Most of the settlers, except Per Hansa, lose their crops to the insects. This seasonal infestation lasts for years, and only the strongest-willed settlers survive. Some die of hunger, others go insane, and many return to the East. Finally the grasshoppers stop coming, and the first minister arrives in the area.

At this point the plot of the novel takes a major turn. Through the consolation and reassurances of the minister, Beret becomes more comfortable on the prairie and loses her sense of guilt. She slowly returns to her normal self. Because she is at peace with her God, she is also at peace with herself.

During one winter, just pages before the novel ends, Per Hansa's neighbor and good friend Hans Olsa becomes very ill and is in need of a doctor. The winter weather is too stormy for anyone to leave the settlement and fetch a doctor. Hans Olsa's health becomes worse, and, when he is on his deathbed, Beret convinces him that he needs a minister. He asks Per Hansa to travel to the next settlement to bring back the minister. The travel is against Per Hansa's better judgment, first because he feels that Hans Olsa is too good of a man to require a minister, and second because the winter storm is too heavy and dangerous. Nevertheless, at Beret's insistence Per Hansa sets out

for the minister. He never makes it, but rather dies from exposure.

INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the role of setting in a novel, its particular effect on the characters and the impact it may have on the plot
2. To become familiar with the genre of historical fiction, and to be able to separate the fiction from the facts on which it is based
3. To appreciate the social, moral, ethical issues and standards as they are portrayed in *Giants In the Earth*
4. To recognize the importance of subtleties of dialogue, action, and silence in general, and specifically the importance of these elements as they actually happen between the characters in the book
5. To relate to superstition, folklore, and legend—the real effects resulting from unreal entities
6. To define, study, and analyze personification and anthropomorphism, and to cite specific instances of these techniques as they appear in the novel
7. To follow vicariously a set of characters as they struggle, fail, succeed and triumph from an early starting point to an inevitable conclusion
8. To question the attitudes and values which are presented in the novel in relation to those which the students have already developed

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. Choose any edition of the Bible. After reading Genesis vi:4 in context, be prepared to paraphrase the excerpt. Restate in your own words the meaning of the passage. Also be ready to comment on the relationship between the literal meaning of the passage and the figurative use of it by the author, O. E. Rolvaag.
2. (p.6) "The caravan seemed a miserably frail and *Lilliputian* thing as it crept over the boundless prairie toward the sky line."
(p.28) "The pastures of *Goshen* in the land of Egypt."
Study the author's use of allusion, i.e., reference to historical places and events.

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Comment on the reason for the author's use of these and other allusions as they occur in the novel.

3. On p. 25 Hans Olsa says: "A bad dream is a good sign, anyway—that's what my mother always said." This is only one of dozens of instances in the novel which reflect the superstitious beliefs of the characters in the story. With the help of your librarian, do research and prepare reports on the sources of those beliefs.
4. Specifically, the mention of "elves" or "trolls" often occurs. In Scandinavian mythology, good elves live in the air, dance on the grass, and rest in trees. However, evil trolls live under the ground and bring sickness and injury to people. Research and prepare reports on these spirits. Compare what you find to the way they are used in the novel.
5. *Giants In the Earth* is classified as historical fiction. That is, while the actual characters may be fictional, the theme, setting, and overall plot has basis in fact. Prepare a map which identifies Dakota territory, the Sioux River, Worthington, Colton, and other places mentioned in the novel as they were in the 1880's.
6. The setting is often an integral part of a piece of literature, and it is often the basis for the major conflict of man versus the forces of nature. Do research on prairie life as it was in the late nineteenth century, and compare your findings with the information contained in the novel.
7. First read James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie*, a novel about life in the Western Plains of the United States set in 1804. Then compare life portrayed by Cooper with life portrayed by Rolvaag. Find additional evidence to that presented in the novel that would tend to support the novel's factual content.

OR

Read Knut Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil*, a social chronicle about settlers set in Norway in the late nineteenth century. Prepare a report which cites parallels between Per Hansa in the United States and the character Isak in Norway.

8. Rewrite the ending of the novel. Change events so that Per Hansa does not die.

OR

Outline a sequel to the novel. Relate what happens to Beret, and establish whether Peder

Seier does indeed have a special role in the future of the settlement.

9. A "saga" is a story, real or imaginary, of heroes and heroic deeds. Find an expanded definition of a saga and prepare an essay which either defends or rejects the idea that *Giants in the Earth* is a saga. Use detailed, supportive evidence in your paper.
10. The plague of the grasshoppers is something with which most people are unfamiliar. Do research and prepare reports on the devastation to crops that these insects have done.

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VOCABULARY TEST

Match each underlined word with its definition listed below.
Write the letter of the definition in the space provided.

- _____ 1. "Have you seen anything?" the mother asked in an anxious voice.
- _____ 2. The first pale fen fire began to shimmer and spread.
- _____ 3. Per Hansa recalled keenly all the scruples and misgivings that had obsessed his wife.
- _____ 4. If it had not been for the deep silence, the infinite surrounding may not have been so oppressive.
- _____ 5. Her nerves were as taut as bowstrings.
- _____ 6. That indomitable, conquering mood took possession of him again.
- _____ 7. The men grew taciturn under the strain.
- _____ 8. Like a crushed thing she sank inertly to the ground
- _____ 9. It was an act of Providence that Per Hansa survived the storm.
- _____ 10. In a deep quandary Per Hansa walked over to the woodpile.
- _____ 11. How would it turn out when the trolls came.
- _____ 12. All forgot their good manners and rushed pell-mell over to the Tonsetens'.
- _____ 13. A living bulwark was springing up between them and the endless desolation.
- _____ 14. Right and wrong were eternal verities with Hans Olsa.
- _____ 15. The strangers returned their friendly greeting in a churlish fashion.
- _____ 16. Hans Olsa sighed deeply, like one recovering from an attack of delerium.
- _____ 17. If Syvert weren't such a milksoop of a man, he would have gone after the sheriff at once.
- _____ 18. Norskies. . . a whole shoal of them—and they are coming right here.
- _____ 19. The western sky foamed and flooded with a wanton richness of color.
- _____ 20. Beret was now going about shabby and unkempt.
- _____ 21. The days were bleak and gloomy, with cold that congealed all life.
- _____ 22. A weird silence had fallen. . . the thing in the west was possessed of baleful life.
- _____ 23. Beret thinks that giving the child that terrible second name to be an almost sacrilege.
- _____ 24. Per Hansa didn't have a chance to extricate himself from the mess he had made.
- _____ 25. Beret's voice had grown querulous again and bore the same childlike expression.

- | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| a. truths, certainties | j. weak, unmanly | s. playful |
| b. marshland | k. harsh, burdensome | t. sluggishly |
| c. to grow still, stiff and thick | l. evil, sorrowful | u. large group or throng |
| d. strained, tense | m. evil spirits | v. quiet |
| e. free | n. a wall—structure of defense | w. messy |
| f. divine guidance | o. guilt feelings | x. serious sin |
| g. rough, lowly | p. complaining, whining | y. disordered condition of the mind |
| h. fearful | q. not able to be controlled | |
| i. state of confusion | r. in great haste | |

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Comprehension Test A

Part 1: True or False (30 points)

In the space provided write *true* if statement is completely true or write *false* if any part of the statement is false.

- _____ 1. As the story opens, Per Hansa is moving his family and all his earthly possessions from Dakota to the Nebraska territory.
- _____ 2. Store-Hans and Ole find many chips of stones that look as though they have been carved out of solid rock.
- _____ 3. The settlers are upright frontiersmen who believe in the evils of liquor and whiskey.
- _____ 4. Beret is the only person who knows the secret about Per Hansa's finding of the stakes.
- _____ 5. Per Hansa burns the stakes he finds in order to destroy the evidence.
- _____ 6. The Irish put down stake with good intentions, but nevertheless, unlawfully.
- _____ 7. Tonseten is the first of the main characters to lay claim to land in the area.
- _____ 8. Syvert fabricates a story in order to convince other Norwegians to join the settlement.
- _____ 9. Han Olsa's first potatoe crop is destroyed by dry weather.
- _____ 10. Even though it is the middle of November, to Per Hansa it seems that many winters must have gone by already.
- _____ 11. Beret and Per Hansa had conceived their first child out of wedlock.
- _____ 12. At least once Per Hansa has thoughts of suicide.
- _____ 13. The plague of grasshoppers lasts many years.
- _____ 14. After six years of the prairie, the first minister arrives.
- _____ 15. If Beret is to be sent away, it is decided that Peder Seier will go with her.

Part 2: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Complete each of the following statements with the best response. Indicate your choice by writing the letter of the appropriate response in the space provided.

- _____ 1. Having recently arrived on their property, Hans Olsa and Per Hansa are surprised to find lying on the property (a) someone else's stakes (b) an Indian grave (c) a herd of buffalo (d) an already plowed field.
- _____ 2. Beret keeps thinking about the fact that (a) there is nothing on the prairie to hide behind (b) Per Hansa is angry with her (c) life will eventually be fine on the prairie (d) the weather will change.
- _____ 3. Kgersti fears the Indians, Sorrina the storms, and Beret fears (a) both (b) her husband (c) Hans Olsa (d) the sun.
- _____ 4. Per Hansa finds stakes with the engraved names of (a) Hansa and Olsa (b) Tonseten and Olsa (c) Gill and Olsen (d) Tronder and Helgeland.

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- _____ 5. When the Irish confront him over their right to his property, Hans Olsa (a) settles the problem with words (b) agrees to share the claim (c) gives up the claim (d) picks up and throws an Irishman over his head.
- _____ 6. The person who convinces the Sognings and the Vossings to settle in the area is (a) Hans Olsa (b) Per Hansa (c) Syvert (d) Henry.
- _____ 7. The thing that Beret does not consider a sin is (a) her filial disobedience (b) her premarital relations with Per Hansa (c) leaving her homeland (d) hating the prairie.
- _____ 8. "Peder Seier" translated means (a) Peter Servant (b) Son of Peder (c) Peter Victorious (d) Peter Salvation.
- _____ 9. The events of the novel take place over a span of (a) 50 years (b) 30 years (c) 15 years (d) 7 years.
- _____ 10. Per Hansa is found dead (a) during a snowstorm (b) in the middle of May (c) in his bed (d) by the Indian whose life he saved.

Part 3: Matching (20 Points)

Match each of the following descriptive phrases to the character to whom the phrase applied. In the space provided write the letter corresponding to the appropriate character.

- _____ 1. godfather of Store-Hans
- _____ 2. not built to wrestle with fortune—too fine grained—fearful of the trolls
- _____ 3. a "milksoop" of a man, weak and timid
- _____ 4. speaks English well—becomes the teacher of the settlement
- _____ 5. bachelor—brings song to the settlement
- _____ 6. middle son—seemingly Per Hansa's favorite
- _____ 7. conceived out of wedlock—the oldest
- _____ 8. already settled a good deal eastward on the Sioux River
- _____ 9. born on the prairie—both loved and feared by Beret
- _____ 10. poor family to which Per Hansa gives potatoes on credit

- | | | |
|----------------------|----------------|---------------|
| a. Henry Solum | j. Sorrina | g. Hans Olsa |
| b. Ole | d. Sam Solum | k. Beret |
| c. Kjersti | e. Peder Seier | l. Store-Hans |
| h. Vossings-Sognings | f. Halling | m. Syvert |
| i. Tronder-Hegeland | | |

Part 4: Essay Questions (30 Points)

1. Much of book is about Beret and her fears. What are her fears? What are the reasons for such fears.
2. Discuss the role of the Indians and their effect on the characters.

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Comprehension Test B

Part 1: True or False (20 points)

In the space provided write *true* if the statement is completely true or write *false* if any part of the statement is false.

- _____ 1. As they travel, Per Hansa keeps far ahead of the family caravan because he can't endure listening to his wife's constant questions.
- _____ 2. One of Per Hansa's mistakes is to build a house and barn under the same roof.
- _____ 3. Per Hansa finds the stakes of previous settlers on Hans Olsa's property.
- _____ 4. In the short brawl with the Irishmen, Hans Olsa throws the first punch.
- _____ 5. Per Hansa convinces the Vossings and the Sognings to settle in the area.
- _____ 6. Per Hansa names his pony "injun" because it was a gift from an Indian.
- _____ 7. Per Hansa uses lime to paint white the walls of his sod hut.
- _____ 8. Beret has hallucinations that she is being visited by her mother.
- _____ 9. Beret and Per Hansa name their son Peder Seier, that is, Sir Peter.
- _____ 10. At one time Per Hansa is in constant fear that Beret may murder her own children.

Part 2: Multiple Choice (30 points)

Complete each of the following statements with the best response. Indicate your choice by writing the letter of the appropriate response in the space provided.

- _____ 1. Per Hansa settles with his family about the year (a) 1760 (b) 1806 (c) 1849 (d) 1873.
- _____ 2. The two tribes located eastward on the Sioux River are (a) the Sioux and the Apache (b) the Lofoten and the Olsen (c) the Tronder and the Hegelender (d) the Cherokee and the Blackhawk.
- _____ 3. Running across Per Hansa's land is (a) an old Indian trail (b) a vein of gold (c) a raging river (d) a line of trees.
- _____ 4. Whenever Per Hansa is gone for the night, Beret (a) spends the evening with neighbors (b) hangs clothes over the windows (c) sits and reads the Bible (d) takes the opportunity to clean house.
- _____ 5. The people who put down stakes unlawfully are the (a) Irish (b) Tronders (c) Syvewrts (d) Olsas.
- _____ 6. The person who originally settles the area is (a) Hans Olsa (b) Per Hansa (c) Syvert (d) Henry Solum.
- _____ 7. When Per Hansa realizes that the Hallings have no food he (a) gives them potatoes on credit (b) gives them potatoes free (c) hires Halling as a farm hand (d) invites the Hallings to settle on a portion of his own land.
- _____ 8. Beret believes that the longer they all remain on the prairie, the more (a) they will become used to the lifestyle (b) they will all become like wild beasts (c) she wishes to have a child (d) people will follow and settle after them.

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- _____ 9. One thing that characterizes Beret's mental change is that she begins (a) to scream at her children (b) to disappear for days (c) to sell Indians her treasures (d) to misplace things.
- _____ 10. One of the reasons for Beret's feeling of coming punishment is that (a) she and Per Hansa conceived a child out of wedlock (b) she left her oldest child with her parents (c) she disobeyed her husband (d) she failed to pray for good weather.
- _____ 11. When the grasshoppers first come, Beret (a) hides with her children in the great chest (b) helps harvest before the crop is ruined. (c) finally shows strength and conviction (d) helps quiet the terror of the other women.
- _____ 12. What Syvert Tonseten does that makes him think he has been sinful is (a) to act as Justice of the Peace and marry a young couple (b) to burn the Irish claim stakes (c) to lie to the neighbors (d) to hoard food.
- _____ 13. After his first service the minister (a) is confident that hope has been restored to the settlement (b) feels that he has failed miserably (c) takes the community's invitation to stay on (d) leaves to return to the populated East.
- _____ 14. Per Hansa dies when he goes to fetch the minister for (a) his wife Beret (b) his child Ole (c) his friend Hans Olsa (d) his daughter And-Ongen.
- _____ 15. What happens to Beret and the children after Per Hansa dies is (a) they return to Norway (b) they continue to conquer the prairie (c) they move in with Hans Olsa (d) not mentioned in the novel.

Part 3: Matching (20 points)

Match each of the following descriptive phrases to the character to whom the phrase applies. In the space provided write the letter corresponding to the appropriate character.

- _____ 1. a strapping man, best friend to Per Hansa
- _____ 2. worries about non-existent things on the prairie
- _____ 3. convinces other Norwegians to settle in the area
- _____ 4. wife of Tonseten, extraordinarily fearful of the Indians
- _____ 5. oldest son of Per Hansa
- _____ 6. Peter Victorious
- _____ 7. have previously staked claim to Hans Olsa's property.
- _____ 8. Hans Olsa's wife, as kind to Per Hansa's children as she is to her own
- _____ 9. bachelor brothers
- _____ 10. dies going for a minister when his best friend is dying

- | | | |
|-------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| a. Solum | f. Sorrina | j. Kjersti |
| b. Tonseten | g. Store-Hans | k. Per Hansa |
| c. Olemand | h. Hans Olsa | l. Beret |
| d. Gill and Olsen | i. Vossing and Sogning | m. Peder-Seier |
| e. And-Ongen | | |

Part 4: Essay Questions (30 Points)

1. Explain Peder Seier and the implication behind the name.
2. Discuss both the positive and negative qualities of Per Hansa's personality.

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Vocabulary Test Answers

- | | |
|-------|-------|
| 1. h | 14. a |
| 2. b | 15. g |
| 3. o | 16. y |
| 4. k | 17. j |
| 5. d | 18. u |
| 6. q | 19. s |
| 7. v | 20. w |
| 8. t | 21. c |
| 9. f | 22. l |
| 10. i | 23. x |
| 11. m | 24. e |
| 12. r | 25. p |
| 13. n | |

Comprehension Test A Answers

Part 1: True and False

1. false
2. true
3. false
4. true
5. true
6. true
7. true
8. true
9. false
10. true
11. true
12. true
13. true
14. true
15. false

Part 2: Multiple Choice

1. b
2. a
3. a
4. c
5. d
6. c
7. d
8. c
9. d
10. b

Part 3: Matching

1. g
2. k
3. m
4. a
5. d
6. l
7. b
8. i
9. e
10. f

Part 4: Essay

1. Beret has guilt feelings which are the result of three things she has done: (a) she conceives a child out of wedlock (b) she marries a sailor against the wishes of her parents (c) she leaves the security of Norway in order to go away to a strange land with Per Hansa—a land in which she feels she has no business. Beret feels a need to be purged of her guilt. She fears that in the strange, open prairie her judgment is coming. This is why she fears the unknowns, i. e., the desolation, the weather, the darkness, the legendary trolls, the earth itself. Her need or fear of judgment becomes an obsession with her and results in mental abnormality.
2. The Indians affect the characters in different ways: (a) To Kjersti they are brutal savages that ravish the homes of the white man (b) to Per Hansa they are human beings who share the same needs as the plainsman (c) to the boys Ole and Store-Hans they are a novelty, a topic for curiosity and tall tales. (d) for Beret, the presence of their burial mound on the property is a physical symbol of the death and damnation that will come to all in the settlement (e) for the author's purposes, their presence provides accuracy and reality to the historical fiction.

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Comprehension Test B Answers

Part 1: True and False

1. true
2. false
3. true
4. true
5. false
6. true
7. true
8. true
9. false
10. true

Part 2: Multiple Choice

1. d
2. c
3. a
4. b
5. a
6. c
7. a
8. b
9. d
10. a
11. a
12. a
13. b
14. c
15. d

Part 3: Matching

1. h
2. l
3. b
4. j
5. c
6. m
7. d
8. f
9. a
10. k

Part 4: Essay

1. Peder-Seier literally means "Peter Victorious." However, the implied connotation is that he was named Peter the "Saviour", or Peter the "protector." i. e., one who would eventually bring fame and success to the settlement. When Peder is born he has the helmet on—born with the caul—an extraordinary happening. Popular superstition has it that a person born with the membrane over his head has been singled out by Destiny or Providence for something extraordinary. Beret considers Per Hansa's choice of a name as one more sacrilegious act for which they will eventually be punished. Per Hansa and the other settlers, however, consider the choice of name appropriate.

2. Positive Traits

- manly, an independent-thinking worker
- not afraid to do more than his fair share
- patient with his wife and the fears of the other settlers
- loyal to his family and friends, especially to Hans Olsa
- brave, as is evidenced by his handling of the Indians
- lucky: with crops, weather, grasshopper plague

Negative traits

- at times thoughtless when it comes to the needs of Beret
- tactless and sometimes exhibits a lack of judgment
- a gambler with fate, eventually leading to his death

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TEACHING NOTES



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