

Before You Read

The Skull and the Arrow by Louis L'Amour *Walden*

In many tales an underdog overcomes great odds to conquer a much more powerful enemy. What qualities do you think it takes to beat the odds? Read "The Skull and the Arrow" to learn of one man's desperate struggle for survival.

LITERARY FOCUS: ALLEGORY

An **allegory** is a story that has two meanings—a literal meaning and a symbolic meaning. Allegories are sometimes written to teach lessons. For example, in L. Frank Baum's allegory *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy literally meets a scarecrow who wants a brain, a tinman who wants a heart, and a cowardly lion who wants to be courageous. On a symbolic level, however, she learns the value of wisdom, compassion, and bravery. Allegories tend to tell about simple situations, using characters that have only one or two distinct traits.

- Read this story on a literal level to find out what happens to whom.
- Then, consider story elements that may be symbolic—that may represent larger ideas.

READING SKILLS: IDENTIFY CAUSE AND EFFECT

A **cause** explains why something happens. An **effect** is the result of something that has happened. It is a good idea, when you are reading a story, to question why things happen.

To help you identify cause-and-effect relationships as you read "The Skull and the Arrow":

- Watch for words and phrases that signal cause-and-effect relationships, such as *because*, *for*, *since*, *so*, *as a result*, and *therefore*.
- Pay attention to the main character's decisions and actions. If a character changes his mind, ask yourself "Why?"
- As an event takes place, try to predict its effect.

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills

Understand allegory.

Reading Skills

Identify cause and effect.

Vocabulary Skills

Understand connotation and denotation.

The Skull and the Arrow

Louis L'Amour

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Heavy clouds hung above the iron-colored peaks, and lancets of lightning¹ flashed and probed. Thunder rolled like a distant avalanche in the mountain valleys. . . . The man on the rocky slope was alone.

He stumbled, staggering beneath the driving rain, his face hammered and raw. Upon his skull a wound gaped wide, upon his cheek the white bone showed through. It was the end. He was finished, and so were they all . . . they were through.

10 Far-off pines made a dark etching along the skyline, and that horizon marked a crossing. Beyond it was security, a life outside the reach of his enemies, who now believed him dead. Yet, in this storm, he knew he could go no further. Hail laid a

Pay careful attention to the notes about **allegory**. By adding up the information, you will come to understand the allegorical meaning of this story.

ALLEGORY

Writers sometimes introduce **symbols** in a story's title. What are the two symbols in this title? What does each object usually symbolize?

1. **lancets of lightning:** A lancet is a small, pointed knife used in surgery. The author is creating an image of lightning slicing the sky.

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IDENTIFY
CAUSE & EFFECT

Why is the man giving up? Underline the causes of the man's decision to quit (lines 15–19).

INTERPRET

In line 24 the narrator says that "man always returns to the cave." Briefly explain what you think this statement means.

VOCABULARY

tentative (ten'tə-tiv) *adj.*: gently probing; uncertain.

IDENTIFY
CAUSE & EFFECT

Re-read lines 36–37. So is a transitional word that signals the effect of the man's defeat. Circle the effect of the man's defeat.

volley of musketry² against the rock where he leaned, so he started on, falling at times.

He had never been a man to quit, but now he had. They had beaten him, not man to man but a dozen to one. With fists and clubs and gun barrels they had beaten him. . . and now he was through. Yes, he would quit. They had taught him how to quit.

20 The clouds hung like dark, blowing tapestries³ in the gaps of the hills. The man went on until he saw the dark opening of a cave. He turned to it for shelter then, as men have always done. Though there are tents and wickiups,⁴ halls and palaces, in his direst need man always returns to the cave.

He was out of the rain but it was cold within. Shivering, he gathered sticks and some blown leaves. Among the rags of his wet and muddy clothing, he found a match, and from the match, a flame. The leaves caught, the blaze stretched **tentative**, exploring fingers and found food to its liking.

30 He added fuel; the fire took hold, crackled, and gave off heat. The man moved closer, feeling the warmth upon his hands, his body. Firelight played shadow games upon the blackened walls where the smoke from many fires had etched their memories . . . for how many generations of men?

This time he was finished. There was no use going back. His enemies were sure he was dead, and his friends would accept it as true. So he was free. He had done his best, so now a little rest, a little healing, and then over the pine-clad ridge and into the sunlight. Yet in freedom there is not always contentment.

40 He found fuel again, and came upon a piece of ancient pottery. Dipping water from a pool, he rinsed the pot, then filled it and brought it back to heat. He squeezed rain from the folds of

2. **volley of musketry**: simultaneous discharge of a number of muskets or other large-barreled firearms.
3. **tapestries** (tap'əs-trēz) *n.*: heavy, woven cloths with decorative designs used as wall hangings.
4. **wickiups** (wik'ē-ups') *n.*: small, temporary houses or shelters made of grass or brush over a frame, used by Indian peoples of the Southwest.

ALLEGORY

Pause at line 81. This is the third time a skull has been mentioned. This repetition suggests it may be functioning as a **symbol**. What do you think a skull might symbolize? List some of your ideas.

Handwriting practice lines for the allegory section.

FLUENCY

Read aloud the boxed passage two times. Try to improve the speed and smoothness of your delivery on your second read.

Notes

Handwriting practice lines for the fluency section.

80 He believed its whiteness to be a stick, imbedded as it was in the sandy floor. He tugged to get it loose, becoming more curious as its enormous size became obvious. It was the skull of a gigantic bear, without doubt from prehistoric times. From the size of the skull, the creature must have weighed well over a ton.

Crouching by the firelight he examined it. Wedged in the eye socket was a bit of flint. He broke it free, needing all his strength. It was a finely chipped arrowhead.

The arrow could not have killed the bear. Blinded him, yes, enraged him, but not killed him. Yet the bear had been killed. Probably by a blow from a stone ax, for there was a crack in the skull, and at another place, a spot near the ear where the bone was crushed.

90 Using a bit of stick he dug around, finding more bones. One was a shattered foreleg of the monster, the bone fractured by a blow. And then he found the head of a stone ax. But nowhere did he find the bones of the man.

Despite the throbbing in his skull and the raw pain in his side, he was excited. Within the cave, thousands of years ago, a lone man fought a battle to the death against impossible odds . . . and won.



Fought for what? Surely there was easier game? And with the bear half blinded the man could have escaped, for the cave mouth was wide. In the whirling fury of the fight there must have been opportunities. Yet he had not fled. He had fought on against the overwhelming strength of the wounded beast, pitting against it only his lesser strength, his primitive weapons, and his man-cunning.

Venturing outside the cave for more fuel, he dragged a log within, although the effort made him gasp with agony. He drew the log along the back edge of his fire so that it was at once fuel and reflector of heat.

Burrowing a little in the now warm sand of the cave floor, he was soon asleep.

For three weeks he lived in the cave, finding berries and nuts, snaring small game, always conscious of the presence of the pine-clad ridge, yet also aware of the skull and the arrowhead. In all that time he saw no man, either near or far . . . there was, then, no search for him.

Finally it was time to move. Now he could go over the ridge to safety. Much of his natural strength had returned; he felt better. It was a relief to know that his fight was over.



EyeWire Collection.

ALLEGORY

Re-read lines 98–104, which describe a long-ago battle. Circle the clues that suggest that the story's main character admires the man from long ago.

WORD STUDY

The word *man-cunning* in line 104 is a combination of the words *man* and *cunning*, which means "skill" or "cleverness." The writer is using the word *man* here in a traditional way to mean "all humans." By combining the words, he is distinguishing the man's intelligence from that of the bear, which was not able to survive.

IDENTIFY

Underline the phrase in lines 113–114 that suggests the skull and arrowhead have a special meaning for the man.

PREDICT

Pause at line 118. What do you think the man will do now?

The Skull and the Arrow

Allegory Chart “The Skull and the Arrow” is an allegory: It is meant to be read on both a literal and symbolic level. It also offers readers some lessons about life. Use the following chart to explore the allegorical meanings of the story events. The left-hand column summarizes the literal story events. In the right-hand column, write the allegorical meaning of those events. The first row has been done for you.

| Literal Story Event | Allegorical Meaning |
|---|---------------------------------|
| The man enters the cave. | The man returns to his origins. |
| The man makes a fire. | <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> |
| The man finds evidence of an ancient fight between a cave man and a bear. | <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> |
| The man returns to face his enemies. | <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> |
| The man displays the arrowhead. | <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> |