

**Three Key Themes in *The Song of the Molimo*:  
Logical Fallacies, Empathy, and Common Ground**

**Description, Discussion, and Suggestions for Classroom Exercises**

Fallacies are errors in reasoning. In *The Song of the Molimo*, a recurring fallacy is one called faulty cause-effect. The anthropologists believe that a larger skull size indicates a greater intelligence, a common misconception back then (88). If a large brain indeed meant greater intelligence, then the blue whale would be the most intelligent creature on earth. Intelligence, the effect, is credited to an incorrect cause. Similarly, the fairgoers believe that because Ota Benga's teeth are sharpened that he must be a cannibal. In reality, some Pygmies considered sharpened teeth beautiful. Therefore, the fairgoers assumed the wrong result.

Many advertisements are based on this fallacy of cause-effect reasoning. For instance, people often assume that using the advertiser's product will cause a beneficial effect: using a certain toothpaste will make their teeth whiter, which will help them attract beautiful people like the models in the commercial. Is that promised result logical? Ask students to list other examples from advertising that abuse cause-effect logic. Some may even want to create their own ads for examples of this fallacy.

Cause-effect reasoning can be powerful if correctly applied. E.D. Morel, a British shipping clerk, discovered in 1898 that King Leopold II of Belgium was using slavery and brute force to harvest rubber and ivory from the African Congo, Ota Benga's home. Morel noticed Belgian ships leaving Antwerp filled with military officers, guns, and ammunition, yet those same ships returned from the Congo laden with rubber and ivory. Morel reasoned that no goods were being traded, and that Belgium had used violence and force to steal resources. Morel investigated further and found

that his cause-effect reasoning was sound. Leopold was enslaving and torturing Africans to make himself a wealthy man. Between 5 to 8 million Congolese died from 1890 to 1910.

You can connect the study of fallacies to science standards by reviewing elements of the scientific process: making hypotheses, designing experiments, measuring, classifying, controlling variables and confirming results. Ask students where the anthropologists showed flawed scientific thinking in trying to assess relative intelligence among the ethnic groups at the fair.

### **EMPATHY**

Unlike most characters in the novel, Frederick tries to figure out why the Pygmies behave as they do rather than judging what he can't immediately understand. When the Pygmies sit on his jacket, Frederick understands that they're not being rude. Because Pygmies live in rain forests, they don't like to sit on wet ground (48, 62). He also shows compassion when a storm approaches because he knows the Pygmies have never been in a big thunderstorm; their Congo forest home is so thickly canopied that the rain sifts down on them gently.

Frederick also knows that the Pygmy version of tug-of-war reflects a different cultural value. In America, we play tug of war as a competition. We value clear winners and losers. The Pygmies, however, play the game to emphasize the value of cooperation. The object is not to win, but to balance the tension on both sides (132). Pygmies rely on teamwork for much of their daily life, such as hunting game and gathering plants. The Pygmies also demonstrate cooperation when Frederick runs the

440-yard dash with them. The Pygmies wait for him so they can finish together (134). Again, group effort is more important than producing a single winner.

Ask students to try a game of American-style tug of war, and then follow it with the Pygmy variety. Begin with an equal number of players on each side. As one side gains an advantage, it should send one person to the other side to balance the tension. As students continue to play, encourage them to transfer players to maintain the balance. Generally, the Pygmies end the game with confusion and merriment. There are no winners.

How comfortable were students with the American version? The Pygmy version? What might Ota Benga say about American tug-of-war?

### **COMMON GROUND**

Jessie Tarbox Beals shows Harry her photographs of the ethnic groups at the 1904 World's Fair. She tells Harry that she'd like to assemble her pictures of mothers and children in a single display. "People will be surprised to see how much alike all the different-seeming mothers are with their children," she says (78). Most fairgoers, including the anthropologists, notice only the differences among the people on display rather than their common bonds.

Harry changes in the novel from being a self-centered boy concerned with how much pleasure and excitement he can find at the fair (28-29), to someone who learns to care about Ota Benga, a person who on the surface seems to have nothing in common with him. When Harry shows Ota Benga the Fair as a tourist, he tries to look through the Pygmy's eyes. "What would Ota Benga like most?" he asks himself (104). At personal

risk, he takes him to the Pike. As his empathy for the Pygmy grows, Harry understands what Ota Benga is feeling when he hears the molimo (93) and is moved to tears. His understanding increases as he witnesses how Ota Benga realizes that he could be a slave (119, 123). Finally, Harry tells Ota Benga that he is not a slave, but free to do what he chooses.

Harry begins thinking that Ota Benga is little more than a burden and pest, but in the end, he understands that despite differences, we all deserve the freedom to be as diverse as all the songs of the molimo (173-174).

Ask students to select a scene from the book to rewrite from Ota Benga's point of view. What might be his impressions of America and its people? What would he find frightening? Funny? Compare these responses to the fair with those of Harry. How are these two characters alike? Ask students to brainstorm a list of their common traits.

To address state or district standards, you can ask students to investigate moments in American history when principles of justice, equality, and freedom were compromised because of racial, ethnic, and religious stereotypes. Have students investigate the internment of Japanese-Americans, anti-Semitic attitudes during World War II, and Jim Crow laws that restricted the rights of African-Americans.