The Last Lesson

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ALPHONSE DAUDET

Born to a silk manufacturer in Nîmes, France, Alphonse Daudet didn't have the smoothest of starts. When Daudet was seventeen, his father lost all of his money, leaving Daudet without any easy educational or employment prospects. Daudet moved to Paris, where he joined his elder brother, to pursue writing, and published his first book of poems, *Les Amoureuses*, in 1858. During his early years in Paris, he was recruited to act as undersecretary to the Duke de Morny, a powerful minister under Napoleon III. When the Franco-Prussian war began in 1870, Daudet enlisted in the army. He continued writing throughout this time, publishing books such as *Letters from My Mill* (1869) and *The Nabob* (1877), as well plays, including *The Last Idol* (1862). His novel *Fromont the Younger and Risler the Elder* (1874) won an award from the French Academy, and as a result Daudet became an established fixture in the Paris literary scene. He would not live long, however. The symptoms of a venereal disease that he had picked up as a young man escalated with age, leading to an affliction of the spinal cord. He died in 1897, at the age of 57.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Daudet came of age during the Second French Empire (1852-1870), headed by Emperor Napoleon III (nephew to Napoleon I, ruler of the first empire). This was a time of expansive economic and cultural growth in France, despite the authoritarian rule under which the society lived, thanks to Napoleon III's effective dictatorship. But the prosperity of the Second Empire, as well as Napoleon's own emperorship, would come to an end with the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71. Prussia, (then consisting of Germany, Poland, and parts of Austria), a growing military power at the time, had imperial ambitions to unify all of the independent German states of Europe. This was resisted by France, which declared war on Prussia in July of 1870. The Prussians, however, were better prepared and organized, quickly invading parts of northeastern France, including Alsace-Lorraine, where Daudet's "Last Lesson" is set. The French were decisively defeated in 1871, a loss that led to the end of the Second Empire and the reign of Napoleon III. The war had a deep effect on Daudet, who enlisted in the French army to fight the Prussians, and who went on to engage with and depict aspects of the conflict in writings such as the "Last Lesson."

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Daudet lived and wrote in Paris at a time when many of the literary luminaries of the age—including Gustave Flaubert (*Madame Bovary*), Edmond de Goncourt, and Émile Zola—also resided in the city. He was good friends with many of these writers and a keen follower of Zola in particular—who coined the term "naturalist" for a mode of writing that was related to, and evolved out of, the realism predominant in the period. Daudet exemplified many of the tenets of this school of writing. Like other naturalists, Daudet's writing emphasizes an objective and realistic depiction of society and the people who live within it. His works pay special attention to the influence of environmental and social conditions on the development of the individual. "The Last Lesson," which explores the impact of education on a young school child, is exemplary in this regard, tracing how a child's village and school environment has a lasting effect on his evolution. This emphasis on social milieu and its impact on the individual mirrors that found in naturalist works such as *Les Rougon-Macquart*, the cycle of twenty novels that Zola wrote between 1871-1893, tracing the influence of environment and heredity on two branches of a family during the Second French Empire (1852-1870).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Last Lesson
- **When Written:** 1873
- **Where Written:** Paris
- **When Published:** 1873, in the collection of stories *Monday Tales*
- **Literary Period:** 19th century, Naturalism
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** A small village in Alsace-Lorraine, France
- **Climax:** French will be banned in school!
- **Antagonist:** The Prussians
- **Point of View:** First person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

A writerly family. Daudet's wife, Julia Daudet (born Allard), whom he married in 1867, was also a writer. Their two sons, Léon and Lucien, would also go on to become writers.

An early start. Precociously gifted in the literary arts from an early age, Daudet wrote his first novel at 14.

PLOT SUMMARY

On a beautiful day in a village in nineteenth-century Alsace-

Lorraine, a region of France, the young schoolboy Franz, is in a rush to get to class. He is particularly anxious because he has not learned the **French** grammar lesson he was assigned by his stern teacher, M. Hamel. Resisting the temptation to skip school and linger outdoors, where Prussian soldiers are drilling, Franz passes the town hall. There, he sees a crowd congregated around the **bulletin-board**. Something must be wrong: the Prussian forces occupying the region communicate their oppressive commands to the subjugated French villagers through the bulletin-board.

But Franz has no time to stop and check. He rushes on his way, finally arriving to find the school eerily free from the commotion that normally marks the beginning of the day. Blushing, Franz enters the **classroom** under the gaze of the students who have already assembled at their desks. To his surprise, M. Hamel teacher speaks to him kindly, simply telling him to take his seat.

Franz notices that his teacher is wearing a beautiful green coat and shirt—clothes for a special occasion—and that elder villagers have assembled at the back of the room. As Franz tries to make sense of it all, M. Hamel makes a shocking announcement: this will be the last lesson that he will give. From tomorrow onwards, the teaching of French will be banned, under orders of the Prussian authorities.

Franz, like everyone else in the room, is devastated. He realizes that this is the news that had been posted on the bulletin-board outside the town hall. The knowledge that he must stop learning his own language—which he has hardly begun to master—gives him a new appreciation for his education, and he regrets all the time he spent procrastinating on his school work.

The moment that Franz has dreaded arrives: he is called on by M. Hamel to recite the grammatical rule he was meant to learn. Franz stumbles and stammers. M. Hamel, rather than scolding Franz, uses the opportunity to lecture the gathered crowd on the evils of neglecting their education. It is this neglect, he says, that now allows the Prussian invaders to question the villagers' French identity. How can the villagers claim to be French, he says, when they don't even know their own language?

M. Hamel goes on to extol the beauties of the French language, telling the class that they must guard it carefully, for it is the key to their freedom. He explains the grammar lesson to the class, and Franz finds himself listening more intently than he ever has before. For the lesson in writing, M. Hamel has the class write out the words "France, Alsace," over and over again. Everyone in the room applies themselves to the exercise with diligence and concentration.

The church-bell strikes twelve, and the trumpets of the Prussian soldiers sound, marking the end of their drilling exercises. It is the end of the last lesson. M. Hamel, pale, turns to the **blackboard** and writes in large letters, "Vive La France!" With a gesture of his hand, he dismisses the class.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Franz (The Narrator) – The narrator of the story, Franz is a young school boy in the French region of Alsace-Lorraine in the nineteenth century. Franz is a dawdler when it comes to schoolwork, preferring to spend time in the woods or by the local river over going to class. He doesn't like learning his French grammar lessons and, when the story begins, is terrified that his negligence will be found out by his teacher, the stern M. Hamel. Franz comes to a new appreciation of his education, however, when Prussian authorities who have occupied his home region announce that school will no longer be taught in French, but in German. Upon hearing this news, Franz feels a great sense of remorse and regrets not taking his French education more seriously while he still had the chance.

M. Hamel – The school master of a small village school in the French region of Alsace-Lorraine. M. Hamel is stern and intimidating to his pupils, among them the narrator of the story, Franz. He has been teaching at the school for forty years. In his **classroom**, he carries a ruler which he raps against his table threateningly. On the day the story is set, he is dressed in his best finery: a green coat, a shirt with frills, and a silk cap—clothes reserved for special occasions. Despite his frightening demeanor, M. Hamel also has a gentler side, revealed on the day that he announces to those gathered in his classroom that Prussian authorities have banned the teaching of **French** in the schools of Alsace-Lorraine. On this day of the last lesson, M. Hamel not only reveals his empathy and kindness, but also his dignity and patriotism, lecturing the gathered crowd on the importance of protecting their language and culture in the face of foreign occupation.

Old Hauser – One of the elder villagers who gathers with the children in M. Hamel's **classroom** to hear the last lesson. He brings his old primer, an elementary reading textbook, with him to the class, and uses it to help the youngest students read their letters. Like the other villagers and school children, including the story's narrator Franz, Hauser is devastated at news that the Prussian authorities who have occupied the French region of Alsace-Lorraine, where the village is located, have forbidden the teaching of **French** in schools. He cries as he helps the young children read and makes everyone else in the classroom want to cry and laugh at once.

Prussian Soldiers – Forces of the occupying Prussian power, which has invaded the French region of Alsace-Lorraine and claimed it for Prussia (then consisting of Germany, Poland, and parts of Austria). Franz passes the soldiers doing their drills as he hurries to school on the morning of the last lesson. The end of the lesson is also marked by the trumpet call of the soldiers returning from their exercises.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Wachter – A blacksmith in a village in the French region of Alsace-Lorraine. As he hurries to school, the narrator, Franz, passes Wachter standing in front of the town hall **bulletin-board**. Wachter tells him not to go so fast, and Franz thinks the blacksmith is making fun of him.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

Set against the backdrop of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, which saw the defeat of France at the hands of Prussia (then consisting of Germany, Poland, and parts of Austria), Daudet's "Last Lesson" explores the effects of cultural subjugation in a time of war. Little Franz, a schoolboy in the French region of Alsace-Lorraine, arrives at school one morning only to discover that, on the order of the Prussian forces that have taken control of the region, lessons will no longer be taught in **French**, but in German—the language of the invaders. The story emphasizes the deep link that exists between language and cultural identity, suggesting that language is not only a marker of unique cultural heritage, it also constitutes its very essence.

Franz isn't very keen on his French lessons to begin with. On the day the story is set, Franz expects to be quizzed by his teacher M. Hamel about grammar, but he hasn't learned the rules on participles he was supposed to and is unprepared for questioning. He would have preferred to spend his day outside, in the beautiful weather, among the fields and the woods, rather than go to class. To Franz, his French grammar lesson represents the drudgery of school—he finds his school work boring and pointless, as reflected in his preference for doing other, seemingly more exciting things. Together, these details establish that Franz initially fails to value his own language.

Yet upon arriving for class and discovering that this is going to be his last French lesson, Franz is devastated, just as the other pupils and the villagers in the classroom are. M. Hamel's announcement that the Prussians have mandated only the teaching of German in the schools of Alsace-Lorraine, the region they've invaded and home to Franz, makes him realize the importance of his language. Franz says that he hardly knows how to write in French, and he is terribly dejected that he must now stop learning the language altogether. When Franz is called on to recite the rule for the participle, he is unable to do so. More than ever, he regrets not studying when he had the chance: "What would I not have given," he tells the reader, "to be able to say that dreadful rule for the participle all through, very loud and clear, and without one mistake?" It is only when he finds his way of life threatened by foreign occupiers that Franz learns that the language he has taken for granted is in fact central to his identity, as well as to his freedom.

The link between the French language and French cultural identity becomes clearer to Franz as the lesson proceeds. When Franz fails to recite the rule for the participle, M. Hamel gently chides him, telling him and the rest of the gathered school children and villagers that it has not served them well to put off learning until tomorrow. It is this procrastination that now gives the Prussian occupiers the right to say, "[Y]ou pretend to be Frenchmen, and yet you can neither speak nor write your own language?" M. Hamel even blames himself, taking responsibility for the times he sent his students to water his flowers, or gave them a holiday, instead of obliging them to learn their lessons. Thus, the teacher emphasizes language as the central aspect of cultural identity. One cannot be French, or even claim to be French, without mastering the French language first. M. Hamel dwells on the specific beauty and clarity of the French language. He exhorts the gathered crowd to guard it carefully, "because when a people are enslaved, as long as they hold fast to their language it is as if they had the key to their prison." Thus, M. Hamel posits the French language not only as a marker of cultural identity, but as its very essence. Without it, those who are subjugated cannot hold on to themselves or their cultures, and thus also their freedom.

M. Hamel not only lectures his students on the link between language and culture, he also demonstrates this link through the final grammar instruction that he gives them. Franz remarks that the school teacher "had never explained everything with so much patience," so that the lesson seems "so easy, so easy!" to little Franz. M. Hamel thus discharges his role as a teacher of French with immense diligence. In communicating the principles of French so effectively, he not only equips his students with a better grasp of their language, he also equips them with a better grasp of their French cultural identity.

Daudet's "Last Lesson," therefore, highlights how people often take language for granted, failing to realize the extent to which it lies at the very heart of their identity. Language, the story argues, is not only the means through which people express themselves, it is also the means through which their culture is preserved and perpetuated.

PATRIOTISM AND RESISTANCE

In telling the story of the last lesson that M. Hamel, a school teacher in the French region of Alsace-Lorraine, gives to Franz and his fellow pupils shortly after Prussian invasion of the region, Daudet explores the multi-faceted nature of patriotism and resistance. Through the

character of M. Hamel, the reader is presented with a figure of resistance who fights his subjugation not by deploying arms, but by deploying patriotic pride. In this way, the story suggests the importance of affirming one's national identity in the face of foreign oppression.

Daudet establishes that M. Hamel and the other the residents of Alsace-Lorraine are a defeated people, their land having passed into the control of Prussian invaders. M. Hamel begins the school lesson by announcing to the stunned students and townspeople who have gathered in the room that this is to be the last lesson to be held in **French**. An order has arrived from Berlin—the seat of the Prussian occupiers—that from the very next day onward, lessons will be taught in German. That M. Hamel must obey this order suggests the extent of his own powerlessness. He and the French community of which he is a part are now subject to the caprices of their foreign masters.

Yet while M. Hamel cannot undo the order from Berlin, he nonetheless acts as a patriotic Frenchman by affirming his national identity as a means of resistance against domination. This is reflected particularly in the exercises that M. Hamel assigns his students during the class. For the lesson in writing, he has the pupils copy out the words "France, Alsace," over and over again. The nationalistic and patriotic dimension of this exercise is made evident in Franz's remark that M. Hamel's copies hanging around the room looked like "little flags floating everywhere." The words associate the region of Alsace with France, rather than with the land of the Prussian occupiers. In this way, the words function as a denial of the Prussian claim to the land, and act, instead, as an affirmation of Alsatian identity as French. Overcome with emotion at the end of the lesson, M. Hamel is unable to speak, and instead writes in large letters on the **blackboard**, "*Vive La France!*" or "Long Live France!" These words he inscribes again represent an act of resistance; they affirm his loyalty to the French republic, even in the face of subjugation to the Prussians, and embody his unconquerable allegiance to his native culture and land.

Not only does the story explicitly establish M. Hamel's allegiance to his native land, it also suggests that the young narrator has learned his teacher's lesson well. The very fact that Franz recounts this story to the reader, giving emphasis to the profound impact M. Hamel's final class had on him, indicates the extent to which the lesson had a lasting effect on his development and thinking. Indeed, the narrator's name—Franz—echoes the name of his motherland. Through this play on naming, Daudet implicitly suggests that the narrator will grow up to follow his teacher's example. The association between little "Franz" and "France" establishes an indelible link between the boy and his nation. He, like his teacher, will develop into a patriotic French citizen.

The "Last Lesson" that M. Hamel gives to his students, therefore, is not just a lesson in language and writing—it is a lesson in patriotism and resistance. Although his land is occupied by Prussian adversaries who have the advantage of superior military strength, M. Hamel defies his oppressors using only a French grammar book, a blackboard, and his own voice. In doing so, he teaches his pupils that even without arms, they have the power to challenge their subjugation.

EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE

Franz, the little schoolboy who narrates Daudet's "Last Lesson," is a rather negligent pupil. He doesn't keep up with his lessons, he doesn't like his teacher, M. Hamel, and he'd prefer to be out roaming the woods of his native region of Alsace-Lorraine, France, rather than in the **classroom**. Yet the lesson he attends on the day the story is set changes his view of school forever. Franz learns the true value of his education when he realizes that school teaches him more than just proper grammar; it teaches him how to be a committed French citizen.

Franz doesn't like going to school, and this is made clear in his consistent attempts to shirk his obligations. On the day the story is set, he considers skipping class to dawdle in the woods, particularly as he hasn't learned the lesson on participles he was meant to memorize, and which he is to deliver before the class that very day. He is, furthermore, afraid of his school teacher, M. Hamel, who carries a "terrible" ruler under his arm with which he terrorizes his students. Franz seems to approach his schoolwork as pointless and unnecessary toil, finding many other things—such as hunting for birds' nests or sliding on the river Saar—to be more worthy of his time.

However, the news that Prussian authorities—who have taken control of Alsace-Lorraine—have banned the teaching of the **French language** in schools, gives him a new perspective on his education. Upon learning from M. Hamel that this will be his last lesson in French, Franz comes to regret his negligence of his school responsibilities. He realizes that he does not yet even have a good grasp of the language he has taken for granted—he hardly knows how to write in French. He begins to see how valuable his schooling is in general. Even the things that had seemed such a nuisance to him before—such as his books—suddenly appear to him to be "old friends" that he can't give up. As such, Franz's newfound respect for his education points to his emerging awareness that his schooling equips him with immensely valuable knowledge, knowledge that extends much deeper than he had realized.

Indeed, during the lesson, Franz discerns that he as well as the rest of the villagers have made a mistake in neglecting their schooling, one which, in the face of foreign occupation, will now cost them. M. Hamel points out that his pupils' parents have colluded in their children's neglect of their education, preferring to send them out to work on farms or at the mills, for extra money. Franz notices that even the elders of the village, gathered at the back of the room, were "sorry [...] that they had not gone to school more." The villagers, therefore, have

prioritized labor over education. This, under the present circumstances, comes to seem shortsighted. Neglecting their own and their children's schooling in favor of work may have helped at the time, but ultimately it has robbed them and their children of the education necessary to hold on to their identities in the face of foreign conquest.

Franz's last lesson is thus one that revolutionizes his own conception of his education. School, Franz learns, is about much more than memorizing boring grammar lessons—school also equips him with knowledge and values that are indispensable to his identity. While more shortsighted needs for work and play may have taken precedence in the village, the story ultimately suggests that it is only the identity instilled through education that has the power to save Franz and his community in times of danger.

COMMUNITY AND SOLIDARITY

Set during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, Daudet's story depicts French villagers responding to restrictions on their freedoms that have been imposed on them by foreign Prussian invaders. As Franz, his school teacher M. Hamel, and other pupils and villagers gather in a **classroom** on the morning that news arrives that the **French language** will be banned in schools in the Prussian-controlled Alsace-Lorraine region, hierarchies and divisions among the village people are cast aside. Instead, the villagers come together as equals and comrades united in their resistance to a foreign adversary, one that threatens their way of life and identity. In portraying the way in which villagers of all ranks, statuses, and ages come together in the classroom, the "Last Lesson" posits the values of equality and solidarity as central aspects of community.

Franz, the narrator of Daudet's story, is a small boy who is at the mercy of the adults of the Alsatian village in which he lives. He is particularly frightened of the stern M. Hamel, his school teacher, who carries a "terrible iron ruler" that he raps violently against the table during lessons. Franz is in a discombobulated state on the morning that the story opens, as he has not learned the rule for participles he was meant to memorize, and is in "great dread of a scolding" by M. Hamel. Franz's anxiety and fear of his stern teacher allude to the rigid social hierarchies that exist in the village. As a child, Franz is no equal to his teacher—and presumably to other adults in the village—and as such he is subject to their authority and displeasure.

Yet when Franz arrives in the classroom, he finds that the rigid distinctions that govern village life have been cast aside on this day. For one thing, he's surprised that M. Hamel, rather than scolding him for his late arrival, speaks kindly to him as he directs him to his seat. Franz is further surprised to see that it is not only small children who have taken their places in the classroom on this morning. The village people have also assembled on the back benches of the room. The presence of the adult villagers in the same room as the children dramatizes the coming together of young and old as one community. The occasion for this leveling of community ties is the dark and momentous news that has reached the villagers from Berlin: the French language will be banned in schools in Alsace-Lorraine by order of the Prussian authorities.

Although M. Hamel, who stands at the front of the room, occupies a position of authority in relation to the assembled crowd, he posits himself as their equal in more ways than one. When Franz fails to recite the rule for the participle he was supposed to learn, M. Hamel doesn't scold him. Instead, he portrays Franz's negligence as emblematic of the negligence of the entire community. Using the collective pronoun, "we," M. Hamel tells the congregation: "Every day we have said to ourselves, 'Bah! I've plenty of time. I'll learn it tomorrow.' And now you see where we've come out [...] We've all a great deal to reproach ourselves with." In using "we," M. Hamel thus includes himself in the reproach, casting himself as no better than the villagers whom he lectures. M. Hamel further castigates himself, by publicly regretting those times he has encouraged his students to put off doing their lessons, by sending them to tend to his flowers, or by giving them a holiday because he wanted to go fishing. By extrapolating and generalizing from Franz's mistake, therefore, M. Hamel draws a lesson that posits all the villagers—including himself—as negligent in their responsibilities. In this way, M. Hamel's lecture casts aside hierarchies and distinctions, rendering children, adults, and teachers alike as liable to the same follies.

The sense of solidarity that the lesson establishes among the gathered villagers is further reflected in the exercises that young and old undertake together. As an exercise in writing, M. Hamel assigns the class to write the words "France, Alsace" over and over again. Franz tells the reader, "You ought to have seen how every one set to work, and how quiet it was! The only sound was the scratching of the pens over the paper." As such, the adults in the room apply themselves to the exercise just as the youngsters do. This joint activity reinforces a sense of the community working together as one unit, and in one spirit. The words that they inscribe—"France, Alsace"—further reflect their communal commitment to their native country, even in the face of Prussian occupiers who have claimed Alsace for themselves. The solidarity between young and old is embodied poignantly in the image of old Hauser, a man who sits at the back of room holding an elementary book in his hands, and helps the babies chant their letters.

The warm, supportive relations that are established and affirmed between M. Hamel, his pupils, and the villagers during the last lesson, therefore, indicate how the community comes together through its practice of the values of solidarity and equality. It is through acts and words of cooperation that the villagers assert not only their commitment to each other, but

also their commitment to their homeland in the face of a foreign threat.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE BULLETIN-BOARD

The bulletin-board that hangs outside the town hall represents the oppression of the Prussian occupiers who have invaded the region of Alsace-Lorraine, where the village that is home to the narrator, Franz, is located. Franz tells the reader that over the two years of Prussian occupation, all of the village's bad news had come from the board. The foreign occupiers communicate their repressive edicts and commands there. Indeed, on the day the story is set, a crowd is gathered around the board reading a new notice. Only after arriving in school to M. Hamel's shocking announcement that this will be the last lesson in **French** does Franz realize that this must have been the new regulation posted on the board by the Prussian authorities. As such, the board symbolizes the despotism of the Prussian occupiers, who, day by day, curtail the freedoms of the French villagers. The bulletin-board is contrasted with the **blackboard** at the end of the story, an instrument of education that M. Hamel and his pupils have access to, and which the teacher uses to inscribe and affirm his and the villagers' deep sense of patriotism and resistance.

THE CLASSROOM

The classroom in which the narrator, Franz, gathers with other pupils and villagers to hear M. Hamel's last lesson represents the power of education. It is there that the **blackboard** is located; and the blackboard itself, of course, is a symbol of resistance via education, as reflected in the subversive message that M. Hamel inscribes on it at the end of the story, "Vive La France!" Thus, it is within the space of the classroom that the gathered crowd receives a lesson from M. Hamel not only in the **French** language, but also in patriotism and resistance. In this way, the classroom in which the lesson takes place symbolizes education's capacity to shape committed French citizens, citizens who can withstand foreign occupation of their region of Alsace-Lorraine by holding on to their French cultural values and identity.

FRENCH

The French language is a symbol of French cultural identity. Franz's teacher, M. Hamel, lectures the gathered pupils and villagers—who have just received news that Prussian occupiers have banned the teaching of French in the schools of Alsace-Lorraine—on the beauty of the French language, telling them that it is the clearest and most logical in the world. As M. Hamel himself argues, the French language is the key to French identity—so long as the villagers hold onto their language, then they can also hold onto their identity, and thus to their freedom, even in the face of foreign occupation. As such, the language is not only an embodiment of the villagers' French identity, it is also the key to their liberation.

THE BLACKBOARD

The blackboard on which M. Hamel writes the words "Vive la France!" ("Long live France!") at the end of the last lesson represents the power of patriotism and resistance. That the blackboard is located within the **classroom** itself alludes to the relationship between education and resistance. The blackboard represents resistance through education, and reflects the story's broader emphasis on language and communication as tools of both liberation and oppression. The words the teacher writes on the board are words that privilege freedom and autonomy. They are a direct denial of the claims of the Prussian occupiers, who have invaded the French region of Alsace-Lorraine, where the story is set, and staked it for their own. That the teacher writes these words on the blackboard is significant, because this board recalls and contrasts with the **bulletin-board** Franz sees at the beginning of the story. While the bulletin-board represents the oppression of the Prussian occupiers, who post their restrictive dictates there, the blackboard functions as a space of liberation, one where M. Hamel—and the villagers—can assert their resistance and patriotism in the face of foreign invasion.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the National Council of Education Research and Training edition of *Flamingo* published in 2015.

The Last Lesson Quotes

❝ For a moment I thought of running away and spending the day out of doors. It was so warm, so bright! The birds were chirping at the edge of the woods; and in the open field back of the sawmill the Prussian soldiers were drilling. It was all much more tempting than the rule for participles, but I had strength to resist, and hurried off to school.

Related Characters: Franz (The Narrator) (speaker), Prussian Soldiers , M. Hamel

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Rushing to school at the beginning of the story, Franz considers skipping class all together to dawdle outdoors, especially given that he hasn't learned the rule for participles assigned to him by his stern teacher, M. Hamel. Though he doesn't act on it, Franz's overwhelming desire to skip school suggests his failure to value his education. Rather than viewing schoolwork as important or edifying, he seems to view it as boring drudgery, as suggested in his assertion that playing outdoors was "much more tempting than the rule for participles."

His reference to the Prussian soldiers drilling behind the sawmill is also significant, for it calls the reader's attention to the time in which the story is set: these foreign soldiers in the French village indicate the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, a war France lost, and which led to the occupation of the region of Alsace-Lorraine by the Prussian power. Thus, the Franco-Prussian War looms closely, and ominously, over this beautiful day.

> When I passed the town hall there was a crowd in front of the bulletin-board. For the last two years all our bad news had come from there—the lost battles, the draft, the orders of the commanding officer—and I thought to myself, without stopping, "What can be the matter now?"

Related Characters: Franz (The Narrator) (speaker), Prussian Soldiers

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

On his way to school, Franz sees a group of villagers congregated around the town hall's bulletin-board. The presence of this crowd alerts him to the fact that something is amiss. The bulletin-board is the means through which the Prussian occupying authorities communicate their repressive commands and edicts to the villagers whom they subjugate. Thus, this bulletin-board reflects the state of war that the village exists in: "[T]he lost battles, the draft, the orders of the commanding officer" communicated on the board set the story within the frame of the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), a conflict that the French lost to the Prussians. As such, the bad news broadcasted on the bulletin-board points to the fact that things have not been going well for the French side, and by extension for the villagers, whose region has passed into the control of the Prussians.

> Usually, when school began, there was a great bustle, which could be heard out in the street, the opening and closing of desks, lessons repeated in unison [...] and the teacher's great ruler rapping the table. But now it was all so still! I had counted on the commotion to get to my desk without being seen; but, of course, that day everything had to be as quiet as Sunday morning.

Related Characters: Franz (The Narrator) (speaker), M. Hamel

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Franz, out of breath, finally arrives late to school, only to find the school building deathly quiet. This stillness gives the sense that something is amiss, adding to his previous suspicions about the crowd gathered around the bulletin-board. Today is not a normal school day, and yet Franz (and the reader) is still in the dark as to why that may be. Furthermore, the silence upends Franz's plans to get to his desk without being seen or scolded by M. Hamel, further characterizing M. Hamel as intimidating and strict. Franz's fear of being caught and punished by the teacher reflect the rigid hierarchy that governs Franz's relationship to M. Hamel—as the student, Franz is powerless, and is therefore completely at his teacher's mercy.

> [...] the thing that surprised me most was to see, on the back benches that were always empty, the village people sitting quietly like ourselves; old Hauser, with his three-cornered hat, the former mayor, the former postmaster, and several others besides.

Related Characters: Franz (The Narrator) (speaker), Old Hauser, M. Hamel

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Franz is forced to enter the silent classroom before the eyes of the entire congregation, including M. Hamel's. And yet, M. Hamel doesn't scold Franz for his late arrival, but rather kindly asks him to take his seat—yet another indication that something strange is going on. After doing so, Franz notices not only that regular school pupils are assembled in the classroom, but villagers as well. More than that, it seems an entire cross-section of the village community has come together, people of different statuses, occupations, and backgrounds. The presence of these adults in the room establishes the sense that the community is coming together in solidarity in the face of some unusual—and momentous—event, which Franz is yet to find out about.

> [...] M. Hamel mounted his chair, and in the same grave and gentle tone which he had used to me, said, "My children, this is the last lesson I shall give you. The order has come from Berlin to teach only German in the schools of Alsace and Lorraine. The new master comes tomorrow. This is your last French lesson. I want you to be very attentive."

Related Characters: M. Hamel, Franz (The Narrator) (speaker), Prussian Soldiers

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

After Franz takes his seat, M. Hamel makes a stunning announcement: the Prussian authorities have issued an order from Berlin, their seat of power, mandating the teaching of German from the next day onward in the schools of Alsace-Lorraine. This therefore, will be the pupils' last French lesson and M. Hamel's last time teaching them. M. Hamel's shocking announcement reveals the limitless extent of the Prussian occupiers' desire for control. Not only have they invaded the region of Alsace-Lorraine, a territory of France, they also seek to re-shape the very cultural identity of the region by forcing its residents to learn the German language, instead of their own native tongue. As such, the Prussian occupiers seek to subjugate the French villagers not only by controlling their physical existence, but also by effacing their linguistic and cultural identity.

> My last French lesson! Why, I hardly knew how to write! I should never learn any more! I must stop there, then! Oh, how sorry I was for not learning my lessons, for seeking birds' eggs, or going sliding on the Saar! My books, that had seemed such a nuisance a while ago, so heavy to carry, my grammar, and my history of the saints, were old friends now that I couldn't give up. And M. Hamel, too; the idea that he was going away, that I should never see him again, made me forget all about his ruler and how cranky he was.

Related Characters: Franz (The Narrator) (speaker), Prussian Soldiers , M. Hamel

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Franz is shocked by M. Hamel's announcement that the Prussian authorities are about to ban the teaching of French in the schools of Alsace-Lorraine. This devastating news leads him to reassess the value of his education. In particular, the prospect of his French education coming to an end awakens him to the great benefits of his schooling. School teaches him valuable things, things which he had taken for granted, as reflected in his propensity to neglect his lessons in favor of play and other distractions. It is only in this moment, for instance, that he realizes that he hardly knows how to write in French, and now he must stop learning all together. Not only that, but Franz comes to discern just how attached he has become to the instruments of his learning—the books that have become like "old friends"—and also to M. Hamel, whom he had always viewed with fear and trembling. Now, the teacher's impending departure makes Franz see M. Hamel in a new, more benevolent light. As such, Franz realizes in this moment not only how little he actually knows, but also how

much he still wants, and desires, to learn.

"I won't scold you, little Franz; you must feel bad enough. See how it is! Every day we have said to ourselves, 'Bah! I've plenty of time. I'll learn it tomorrow.' And now you see where we've come out. Ah, that's the great trouble with Alsace; she puts off learning till tomorrow. Now those fellows out there will have the right to say to you, 'How is it; you pretend to be Frenchmen, and yet you can neither speak nor write your own language?'"

Related Characters: M. Hamel (speaker), Prussian Soldiers , Franz (The Narrator)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

When Franz is called on in class to recite the rule for participles he was supposed to have learned, he is unable to. M. Hamel, however, doesn't scold him. Instead, he uses Franz's failure to illustrate the larger failure of all the French natives of Alsace-Lorraine. These French citizens, according to M. Hamel, have not taken their education seriously enough. As a result, they lack a sound grasp of their own language. By neglecting their education, and thereby their own language, they allow the Prussian invaders to justify their occupation of the region. If the French citizens of Alsace-Lorraine do not have a proper grasp of the French language, they compromise their own French identity—and the Prussians can argue that they have a right to claim the region for their own.

"Your parents were not anxious enough to have you learn. They preferred to put you to work on a farm or at the mills, so as to have a little more money. And I? I've been to blame also. Have I not often sent you to water my flowers instead of learning your lessons? And when I wanted to go fishing, did I not just give you a holiday?"

Related Characters: M. Hamel (speaker), Franz (The Narrator)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

M. Hamel, lecturing the pupils and villagers gathered in the classroom on the dire consequences of their negligence of education, casts the blame on the adults of Alsace-Lorraine, including himself. Parents have been more concerned about using their children to earn money, contends M. Hamel, than having them learn. M. Hamel's words thus suggest that the people of the region have privileged labor over education, and their children have suffered as a result. Notably, M. Hamel doesn't excuse himself from the blame, recognizing that he has often compromised his pupils' education by privileging his own needs and whims. M. Hamel's words thus cast blame on the entire community of adults, and in doing so, imply that responsibility for proper education of the next generation of French citizens depends upon the choices that this whole community makes.

[...] M. Hamel went on to talk of the French language, saying that it was the most beautiful language in the world—the clearest, the most logical; that we must guard it among us and never forget it, because when a people are enslaved, as long as they hold fast to their language it is as if they had the key to their prison.

Related Characters: Franz (The Narrator) (speaker), Prussian Soldiers , M. Hamel

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5-7

Explanation and Analysis

In speaking to the congregated pupils and villagers on the importance of devoting themselves to their education, M. Hamel's passion for the French language becomes apparent. The superlatives he uses—praising the language as the "most beautiful in the world," "the clearest, the most logical," reflect his deep love and admiration for the language, and by extension, the deep love and admiration he has for his culture. Indeed, the link between language and culture is implied in M. Hamel's comment that "when a people are enslaved, as long as they hold fast to their

language it is as if they had the key to their prison." This comment suggests that language is the key to cultural identity. While the Prussian occupiers, for instance, may wish to erase the villagers' French identity, the villagers have the power to hold onto their French culture—and therefore evade the Prussian occupiers' attempts to subjugate them—by clinging to their native language. Language is the means through which culture, and therefore identity, is not only expressed, but also maintained.

After the grammar, we had a lesson in writing. That day M. Hamel had new copies for us, written in a beautiful round hand—France, Alsace, France, Alsace. They looked like little flags floating everywhere in the school-room, hung from the rod at the top of our desks.

Related Characters: Franz (The Narrator) (speaker), Prussian Soldiers , M. Hamel

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, M. Hamel assigns the class what initially appears to be an exercise in writing. However, this task is also an exercise in patriotism, for the words "France, Alsace," that the students and villagers copy out assert the identity of the Alsace-Lorraine region as French. In doing so, these words challenge the claim that the foreign Prussian occupiers are making on the land. The patriotic underpinnings of this exercise are further highlighted in Franz's comment that M. Hamel's copies hanging around the room "looked like little flags floating everywhere"—flags, of course, which assert the primacy of French identity.

After the writing, we had a lesson in history, and then the babies chanted their *ba*, *be bi*, *bo*, *bu*. Down there at the back of the room old Hauser had put on his spectacles and, holding his primer in both hands, spelled the letters with them. You could see that he, too, was crying; his voice trembled with emotion, and it was so funny to hear him that we all wanted to laugh and cry.

Related Characters: Franz (The Narrator) (speaker), M. Hamel, Old Hauser

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

As the last lesson comes to a close, M. Hamel has the very youngest of the pupils—the infants—chant the alphabet. One of the elder villagers in the class that day, Hauser, uses his old primer, a reading book, to help the babies along. Old Hauser's action shows how, under the peril of Prussian foreign occupation, the French villagers come together as community, and in solidarity. The old help the young along, supporting them and participating in their education, as Hauser does here. Furthermore, Hauser's own emotions infect those around him—the rest of class wants to cry along with him, and also to laugh. The pupils and villagers in the classroom, therefore, come together as one community not only in their shared activities of writing and reading, but also in their sentiments.

All at once the church-clock struck twelve. Then the Angelus. At the same moment the trumpets of the Prussians, returning from drill, sounded under our windows. M. Hamel stood up, very pale, in his chair. I never saw him look so tall.

"My friends," said he, "I—I—" But something choked him. He could not go on.

Then he turned to the blackboard, took a piece of chalk, and, bearing on with all his might, he wrote as large as he could—

"*Vive La France!*"

Related Characters: Franz (The Narrator) (speaker), Prussian Soldiers , M. Hamel

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

It is the end of the last lesson, as signaled by the striking of the church-clock, as well as the tolling of the church bells to mark the Angelus. The reappearance of the Prussian

soldiers at the end of the story—who have now completed their drills—reminds the reader of the threatening shadow of the foreign occupiers looming over the villagers. M. Hamel's inability to speak in these final moments suggests the depth of his emotional turmoil. His forty years of teaching in this classroom are now over, and he is clearly devastated. And yet, M. Hamel is not defeated. His final action of inscribing the words "*Vive La France!*" ("Long Live France!") on the blackboard represent a final act of patriotism and resistance. To the very last, M. Hamel refuses to concede the power of the Prussian occupiers over him. Instead, he asserts his loyalty and commitment to his motherland through the words that he inscribes. This final image of the blackboard also recalls the bulletin-board that Franz, the narrator, had passed at the beginning of the story. While the bulletin-board on which the Prussian authorities post their repressive dictates represents the oppression of their rule, the blackboard—an instrument of education—is used by M. Hamel subversively to assert his freedom, making it a symbol of resistance.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE LAST LESSON

The narrator of the story, a little boy, rushes to school one morning. He is especially anxious on this day, as he expects his stern teacher, M. Hamel, to question him and the rest of the pupils on participles. The narrator knows nothing about participles, as he has not learned the lesson.

The narrator's comments—his dread of being late for class, as well getting a scolding from his teacher—communicate to the reader that he is a young child. Furthermore, the fact that the narrator has not learned the lesson on participles indicates that he is not the most diligent pupil, but rather a procrastinator when it comes to his schoolwork.

The narrator contemplates skipping school altogether and spending the day outside. The weather is warm and bright and birds are chirping. He sees Prussian soldiers doing their drills in an open field. The beautiful day tempts him, but the narrator resists the urge to skip school and hurries onwards.

The narrator's negligence of his schooling is further reflected in the temptation that he feels to skip school all together. The Prussian soldiers that he sees allude to the presence of conflict in the region. In fact, these soldiers signal to the reader that the story is set during the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71). During this conflict, Prussian forces invaded the French region of Alsace-Lorraine. In spite of the beautiful day and the chirping birds, therefore, the presence of the soldiers indicates that all is not well in this idyllic French landscape.

As he passes the town hall, the narrator sees a crowd gathered around the **bulletin-board**. Over the previous two years, all of the town's bad news—about battles lost, the draft, orders of the commanding officer—has been posted there, and now the narrator wonders what the matter is.

The bulletin-board is the instrument through which the Prussian occupiers of the village communicate their edicts to the villagers. In this way, the bulletin-board is also a symbol of Prussian occupiers' oppressive power. France is losing the war to the Prussians, and this is why foreign forces have occupied the narrator's village and the region more broadly. That the villagers perceive the news and orders posted by the Prussians on the board as "bad" points to their subjugation—they are under the control of a foreign power, one that imposes demands and restrictions on them that they are unable to challenge.

As the narrator hurries past the crowd, the town's blacksmith, Wachter, calls out to him, referring to him as "bub," and tells him not to go so fast, since he'll make it to school "in plenty of time!" The narrator thinks the blacksmith is making fun of him.

Wachter's comment to the narrator indicates that this community is tight-knit. The narrator knows the blacksmith by his first name, while Wachter uses the nickname "bub" to refer to the narrator. Though the blacksmith is indeed making fun of the narrator's hurry, he is doing it endearingly and with humor.

Having been in such a rush, the narrator arrives at school out of breath. He is surprised to note that the school is uncharacteristically quiet. Usually, at the beginning of the day, there is a great noise. One can hear desks opening and closing, lessons being repeated, and the teacher's ruler rapping against the table. But on this morning the school is eerily quiet and still. The narrator had hoped that he could sneak to his desk unseen in the midst of the commotion.

The eerie silence that the narrator encounters upon arriving at school indicates that something is awry on this school day. Children are naturally loud and boisterous, as they are on normal school days, but this unusual silence suggests that something drastic has silenced them. The quiet is therefore a bad sign—not only because it means that the narrator can't sneak to his desk unseen, but because it suggests that something is amiss.

Through a window, the narrator sees his classmates already seated, and his teacher M. Hamel walking up and down with his ruler under his arm. The narrator, terrified and blushing, is forced to open the door and enter the **classroom** in front of everyone.

The narrator's feelings upon entering the classroom before the assembled students and teacher points to the extent of his terror of M. Hamel in particular. This indicates the power imbalance in the relationship between the little pupil and his intimidating teacher. M. Hamel has the power to punish the narrator severely, and it is this which renders the narrator so afraid.

To his surprise, M. Hamel speaks to the narrator kindly, referring to him as "little Franz," and tells him to take his seat quickly. Franz takes his seat, and only then, when he has recovered slightly from his fright, does he notice that M. Hamel has on his beautiful green coat, a frilled shirt, and a silk cap—clothes that he normally wears only for special occasions, such as inspection and prize days.

M. Hamel's unexpected kindness towards the tardy narrator again alerts the reader to the fact that nothing is normal on this school day. The teacher seems to have suddenly shed the severity to which his students, including Franz, are accustomed. Furthermore, the teacher's special clothing—elaborate dress for special occasions—reinforces the sense that something momentous is happening on this day.

The atmosphere of the **classroom** today is strange. There is a solemnness in the air. Not only that, but Franz is most surprised to see village people assembled on the benches at the back of the room, including old man Hauser, the former mayor, and the former postmaster of the town. Everyone looks gloomy. Old Hauser sits with an open primer on his knees.

As the narrator takes in his surroundings properly for the first time, he sees more signs confirming that this is an unusual school day. The solemnness in the room extends from and echoes the silence he had first encountered upon arriving at school. That various elder village notables are also assembled in the room is a further indication that this is a special day—but not in a good way, considering how gloomy everyone seems. That elders have come together with children in the room is also significant, because it suggests that the entire village community has assembled in the classroom. There are people of various statuses and occupations: not only young students, but a former mayor, a former postmaster, and old man Hauser, as well as M. Hamel. This broad array of individuals represents a cross-section of the entire village community gathering together in the classroom.

M. Hamel mounts his chair, and, speaking gravely and gently, announces to the gathered crowd that this will be the last lesson he will preside over. An order has arrived from Berlin—seat of the region's Prussian occupiers—that from the next day onward, only German will be taught in the schools of Alsace-Lorraine. A new school master will arrive tomorrow. M. Hamel further instructs the crowd that he wants them to be very attentive, as this will be their last **French** lesson.

M. Hamel's shocking announcement reveals the lengths to which the occupying Prussian authorities are willing to go to control and subjugate the French citizens of Alsace-Lorraine. Not only have they gained military control of their land, but they also desire to control the villagers' means of self-expression, by banning the French language and imposing German instead. This Prussian order, therefore, indicates that the Prussian authorities seek to subjugate not only the villagers' physical existence, but also their minds.

These words come as a shock to little Franz, who realizes that the villagers he had seen by the **bulletin-board** outside the town hall had gathered to read the order that had just been posted there.

Franz's own shock over M. Hamel's announcement indicates that the new Prussian order represents an unprecedented repression of freedoms in the village. It is an escalation of foreign oppression, as indicated by the fact that so many were gathered around the bulletin-board earlier in the day, when Franz had passed by the town hall on his way to school.

M. Hamel's words also come as a shock to Franz because he suddenly realizes how little he knows of the **French language**. He barely knows how to write in French, and he is devastated that he must stop learning. He is suddenly remorseful over wasting so much time playing outdoors rather than studying. He is even sorry to think that the stern M. Hamel, whom he fears, is leaving forever.

M. Hamel's announcement has a second effect on Franz: it jolts him into reassessing the value of his education. While Franz has clearly been negligent in applying himself to his studies, as indicated by the fact that he has not even bothered to learn the rule for participles he was assigned for this school day, the news that the Prussian authorities have banned the teaching of French awakens him not only to how little he knows of his own language, but also how much he wants to learn. Furthermore, Franz begins to have a new appreciation for his teacher, realizing that M. Hamel, in spite of his customary severity, has much knowledge to offer him, knowledge from which Franz will now be cut off.

Franz realizes that M. Hamel has on his best clothes in honor of this last lesson that he is giving, and that this is also why the villagers have gathered in the room—to show their appreciation for the school that they themselves had neglected as children, and to honor M. Hamel's forty years of service as teacher, as well as to show respect for their country, now occupied by foreigners.

That M. Hamel is wearing his best clothes in honor of this last lesson indicates the teacher's own great respect for his office, as well as the seriousness with which he has undertaken, and is undertaking, his duties as teacher. The day of his last lesson is indeed a momentous occasion requiring special dress, as it marks the end of his forty years of service to the school and to the village. The dress reflects M. Hamel's dignity, giving him—and his vocation—an air of nobility. The presence of the elder villagers in the room reveals their appreciation and gratitude for M. Hamel's service, as well as for the education of which he is a purveyor. The teacher's dignified dress and the presence of villagers on this day of the last French lesson reveals the community's desire to honor their country and mother tongue, both of which are under attack by the Prussian invaders.

M. Hamel calls Franz to recite the rule for the participle, which, of course, he has neglected to learn. More than ever, he is ashamed that he has not learned his lessons. He stands up to recite but stumbles on the first words.

Franz's failure to recite the rule for participles takes on a new, grave significance on this momentous day. The neglect of his school work suddenly seems not only to be a neglect of some grammar rules, but also a neglect of his own duties as a French citizen and a French speaker whose language and identity are under threat from foreign occupiers. It is for this reason that Franz feels such immense shame upon being unable to recite the rule.

M. Hamel doesn't scold Franz for not knowing the rule, but he uses the occasion to lecture the class. He tells the crowd that each day they have been putting off learning until tomorrow. This is the trouble with their home region of Alsace. It is why now the Prussian occupiers have the right to say to them, "you pretend to be Frenchmen, and yet you can neither speak nor write your own **language**?"

M. Hamel again acts with kindness by choosing not to scold Franz, but rather extrapolating from his failure to show how all the natives of Alsace-Lorraine have failed in their educational duties. By connecting the occupiers' justification of their conquest of Alsace-Lorraine with the failure of the Alsatians to know their own language properly, M. Hamel makes explicit the link between language and power. The Prussians can justify their claim to Alsace-Lorraine because they can contend that the Alsatians are not true Frenchmen, as they cannot even speak nor write their own language properly. As such, the power that the Prussians can have over the natives of the region is directly linked to the natives' grasp of their language, and therefore of their French identity.

M. Hamel continues by saying that the children's parents have not been anxious to have them learn, sending them out to work instead. M. Hamel also reproaches himself, taking responsibility for those times he had encouraged his students to procrastinate, because he himself wanted to do other things.

M. Hamel highlights how the villagers have privileged labor over education. By sending out their children to work instead of encouraging them to learn, the villagers have prioritized the value of money over the value of learning. M. Hamel, however, doesn't take a high-handed or condescending attitude towards the adults and children whom he lectures. By casting blame on himself as well, he posits himself as an equal culprit in the negligence of the children's education. The tone and words that he adopts are ones that cast aside hierarchies and distinctions, positing adults, teachers and children as all culpable for the same mistakes.

M. Hamel then goes on to speak about the beauties of the **French language**. He encourages the class to guard the language carefully, because, he tells them, when a people are enslaved, so long as they "hold fast to their language it as if they had the key to their prison."

M. Hamel's great love for his mother tongue is reflected in the praise that he lavishes on it. Furthermore, his comment on the importance of guarding the language emphasizes the link between language, identity, and freedom. Language not only expresses cultural identity, it constitutes its very essence. Without language, those who are subjugated cannot hold onto their identity, and therefore also to their freedom.

The teacher then proceeds to the **French** grammar lesson, reading from a book to the students. Franz understands everything M. Hamel says with extraordinary clarity. He thinks that he has never listened so carefully to the teacher before, and that the teacher himself has never explained things so clearly and with so much patience.

Franz's concentration and grasp of the French lesson reflects the fact that, for the first time, he is applying himself fully to his studies. He has finally come to understand the value and significance of his education. His impression that the teacher has never explained things so clearly also points to M. Hamel's own power and competence as a teacher, in fulfilling the duties of his office on this day of the last lesson.

After the grammar lesson, the class proceeds to a lesson in writing. M. Hamel has the pupils copy out the words "France, Alsace," over and over again. All the students are perfectly quiet as they concentrate on their work.

M. Hamel's assignment of the words "Alsace, France" to the class indicates the teacher's intention of instilling a sense of patriotism in his pupils. The exercise functions not only to improve their writing skills, but to challenge the Prussian claim to Alsace-Lorraine by linking Alsace to France. In this way, the students are guided to express and assert their patriotic allegiance to France.

As he writes, Franz glances up at M. Hamel every now and again. The teacher sits motionless, looking at one thing and the other in the room. Franz thinks it is as if he wants to fix in his mind how everything looks in the room. The teacher has been there for forty years, with very little changing except for the trees growing taller and the desks and benches being worn smooth by the pupils. Franz thinks that M. Hamel must be heartbroken to be leaving it all. The teacher and his sister, who is packing upstairs, are leaving the country the very next day.

Franz's impressions of M. Hamel in these moments of silence deepen and nuance his understanding of his teacher. While before the last lesson, Franz knew his teacher only as a fearful taskmaster, over the course of the last lesson he has witnessed other sides of the teacher emerge. Not only has the teacher expressed kindness towards him and the rest of the class, as well as a deep sense of patriotism, but here he seems to embody other emotions: sadness, loss, and nostalgia. He must give up the classroom that has been a home to him for forty years.

But Franz is impressed by M. Hamel's determination to oversee every lesson until the very last. The pupils move onto a history lesson, before the babies are given their turn to recite ABCDs. Old Hauser, sitting at the back and reading from an old primer, helps them by spelling the letters with them. He is crying, and everyone who hears him also finds that they want to laugh and cry at once.

M. Hamel's insistence on seeing through all the lessons to the very last also reveals another side of the teacher to Franz: his dedication. In spite of M. Hamel's tumultuous emotions, the teacher is determined to fulfill every aspect of his duties on this last day. The extent to which the village community has come together during this last lesson is reflected in old Hauser's act of helping the babies read their letters. This act reflects the solidarity between young and old, as the old help along, and participate in, the education of the youngsters. The poignancy of this act moves the entire class.

The clock strikes twelve. Prussian trumpets sound, marking the end of the soldiers' drill. M. Hamel stands up, pale but tall. He begins speaking, addressing the class as "My friends," but is unable to continue. He turns to the **blackboard** instead, and with a piece of chalk he writes in large letters, "*Vive La France!*" He leans his head against the wall and gestures to the class, telling them school is dismissed.

The trumpets of the Prussian soldiers that sound along with the striking of the clock remind the reader of the ominous presence of the foreign occupiers just outside the school doors. M. Hamel's inability to speak during the final moments of the lesson reflects the tumult of his emotions on this occasion. And yet, even in the midst of this tumult, M. Hamel manages one final act of resistance: by inscribing the words "Long Live France!" on the blackboard, M. Hamel makes a final challenge to the oppressive power of the Prussians, asserting his allegiance to his motherland, France. In this way, he again uses the instruments of education—in this case the blackboard—to assert his freedom and that of his country.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Abbas, Fatin. "*The Last Lesson*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 6 Dec 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Abbas, Fatin. "*The Last Lesson*." LitCharts LLC, December 6, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-last-lesson.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Last Lesson* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Daudet, Alphonse. The Last Lesson. National Council of Education Research and Training. 2015.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Daudet, Alphonse. The Last Lesson. New Delhi: National Council of Education Research and Training. 2015.