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Response Journal

Reflections: A Student Response Journal

Uncle Tom's Cabin

Harriet Beecher Stowe

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To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection–that is, stopping to think about what you are reading–that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

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Chapter 1 – In Which the Reader Is Introduced to a Man of Humanity

1. Critics believe that the title of this chapter is an example of irony. Write a dialogue between two students discussing this idea. One of the students is explaining the irony to the other student, who does not understand. The dialogue might begin as follows:

   Student One: OK, do you understand the definition of irony?

   Student Two: I think so. It is like sarcasm, isn't it?

   Student One: Yes…like the title of this chapter. It says a "Man of Humanity…

2. This chapter makes the case that even good humored masters cannot protect their slaves from harm because of the *law*, which defines them as *things* instead of people. Write a letter to the editor of a pro-slavery newspaper explaining this idea.

Chapter 2 – The Mother

3. As the owner of the factory where George Harris works, write a letter to Mr. Harris outlining the reasons why you want George to continue in your employ.

4. The last paragraph of this chapter reads:

   > A very humane jurist once said, The worst use you can put a man to is to hang him. No; there is another use that a man can be put to that is WORSE!

   To what extent do you agree or disagree with the above statement? Write about something that, in your opinion, might be worse than death for you.

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Chapter 9 – In Which it Appears that a Senator Is but a Man

23. In this chapter, Mary Bird tells her husband that she does not approve of the new law passed by the state Senate which makes helping run-away slaves a crime. She says, "Poor, homeless, and houseless creatures! It's a shameful, wicked, abominable law, and I'll break it, for one, the first time I get a chance; and I hope I *shall* have a chance, I do!"

    Can you think of any reasons why you might consider breaking a law? Write a letter to Mary Bird telling her about a law in today's modern world that you think is unjust and that, given the opportunity, you would consider breaking.

24. Master Bill, Mr. and Mrs. Bird's son, tells about the time his mother whipped him for stoning a cat. Mrs. Bird can not tolerate any kind of cruelty. Write about an incident from your experience, from a movie, or a story where someone was unnecessarily cruel to a helpless creature. How did the incident make your feel?

25. In the following excerpt, the narrator discusses the idea that the politicians who pass laws forbidding anyone to help a fugitive slave do so without considering that perhaps the fugitive is a poor mother who is trying to save her child. The legislators do not think of the slaves as individuals, but instead, think of them as a faceless group.

    > He [Mr. Bird] was as bold as a lion about it, [the new law] and "mightily convinced" not only himself, but everybody that heard him; - but then his idea of a fugitive was only an idea of the letters that spell the word, - or, at the most, the image of a little newspaper picture of a man with a stick and bundle, with "Ran away from the subscriber" under it. The magic of the read presence of distress, - the imploring human eye, the frail, trembling human hand, the despairing appeal of helpless agony, - these he had never tried. He had never thought that a fugitive might be a hapless mother, a defenseless child, -…

    As Senator Bird, write a diary entry discussing your feelings about the new law. In the entry, give the reasons you initially supported the law and how you feel about it now, after seeing Eliza and her child.

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Chapter 12 – Select Incident of Lawful Trade

31. In this chapter, Tom and Haley are each reflecting on their lives. Tom is thinking about leaving his home and family. Haley is thinking about his business. Rewrite these two pages as a dialogue between Tom and Haley. The dialogue might begin as follows:

    Mr. Haley: How tall are you Tom? You look to be in pretty good shape to me.

    Tom: I don't rightly know how tall I am. Taller than you. My sons, how I do miss them, were going to be tall too.

    Mr. Haley: I need to get more men, women and children for…

32. In this chapter, the narrator seems to be saying that men can become accustomed to the horror of slavery so that they are no longer moved by it. Haley sells a mother's young son, forever separating her from her child.

    > The wild look of anguish and utter despair that the woman cast on him might have disturbed one less practiced; but he was used to it. He had seen that same look hundreds of times. You can get used to such things, too, my friend; and it is the great object of recent efforts to make our whole northern community used to them, for the glory of the Union.

    In the news, there are many examples of violence in our modern world. Many instances of violence are being carried out by young men and women. Some critics of television and movies believe that these young people have become hardened to violence in the media. They learn that violence is a normal part of life. To what extent do you agree or disagree with these critics? In one or two paragraphs, discuss your views on the extent to which a person can become hardened by repeatedly witnessing pain, misery, or violence in the media.

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Chapter 17 – The Freeman's Defence

39. In this chapter, Simeon reads to George from the Bible. George believes the words Simeon reads to him about the kingdom of heaven and about the importance of putting his trust in the Lord. Write a prayer George might say asking the Lord to help him and his family. Where possible, use phrases from the text to enhance the prayer. It might begin as follows:

    Dear Lord,
    Simeon tells me I must trust in the Lord,
    I will try…

40. Tom, the slave trader, is shot by George and abandoned by his slave-trading partner, Marks. As Tom, write a paragraph expressing how you feel about Marks.

Chapter 18 – Miss Ophelia's Experiences and Opinions

41. In this chapter, St. Clare drinks too much liquor. Tom tries to help St. Clare to stop his self-destructive behavior. Pru, an old slave, also turns to drink to lessen her pain.

    People today who have drinking problems sometimes attend A.A. or Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. At the meetings, each person stands up in front of the group and declares that they are alcoholics. As either St. Clare, or as Pru, assume that you are standing in front of an A.A. meeting. First, declare yourself to be an alcoholic, and then give a brief speech explaining your reasons for turning to drink.

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