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Prestwick House
Literature
Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



The Contender

by Robert Lipsyte

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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P.O. Box 658, Clayton, DE 19938
www.prestwickhouse.com
800.932.4593

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to

1. infer ideas about characters and events when these meanings are not explicitly stated.
2. discuss the author's style of writing, including the ways he uses descriptive phrases and short sentences to help convey the mood of the story.
3. point out examples of digression in the story and understand the ways this technique helps to prepare the reader for future action.
4. recognize the following literary terms: antagonist, foreshadowing, personification, protagonist, setting, simile.
5. discuss the following as symbols in the story:
 - Henry
 - the stairs leading to Donatelli's gym
6. identify the climax of the story.
7. cite incidents from the story to show that James is a foil for the protagonist.
8. point out examples of stereotyping in the story.
9. discuss the way the author uses allusion to make the story believable.
10. understand the significance of the title of the novel.
11. cite incidents from the story to support the following overall theme: The measure of people is not whether they win, but the effort they make to succeed.
12. discuss the following generalizations about life and cite incidents from the story showing the extent to which Alfred applies these lessons to his life:
 - A man must control his fear to make it work for him.
 - It is worse for a man to quit before he really tries than it is for a man to fail.
 - A young man must be ready for opportunities when they arise.
 - A man must learn to do things for himself.
 - A man must think for himself.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Describe the setting of the story.
2. Which incident in the novel marks the climax of the story?
3. James and Alfred are childhood friends, but they take different paths as young men. What are some of the factors in the lives of each of these young men that might account for this difference?
4. In what sense are Henry and Alfred similar? What does Henry do that surprises Alfred?
5. For what reasons does Aunt Pearl both approve and disapprove of Alfred's decision to learn to fight?
6. Discuss the ways in which Mr. Donatelli, Mr. Epstein, and Spoon all act as mentors for Alfred. In what way might Alfred become a mentor himself?
7. Who is the antagonist in the story? To what extent is Alfred able to resist this influence?
8. Read the following description of the stairs leading to Donatelli's Gym. What might they symbolize in the story?

“He hit the first step, feeling it sag under him, but he kept going, up wooden steps worn so smooth his loafers slipped backwards, but the chilly legs were getting warmer now. Put one after another, Alfred, panting, huffing, low steps but hundreds of them, thousands of them in the darkness, the stairs so steep he sometimes fell to all fours, scrambling higher, past the sign, DR. COREY, past the sign GYM—THIRD FLOOR, faster until his breath tangled in his ribs, higher until his throat was dry, faster, higher, until a door loomed before him. GYM.”

9. Cite incidents from the novel to support the idea that this is a coming-of-age story about Alfred. Discuss whether it is also a coming-of-age story about Henry.
10. Find examples of each of the following literary devices in the story: simile, personification, allusion, symbol, foreshadowing, theme.
11. Discuss the significance of the title and whether Alfred becomes “a contender” by the end of the story.
12. Find an example of the author's use of stream of consciousness to give the reader a view into Alfred's thoughts. How does this technique also help to add realism to the story?
13. Which one of the characters in the story is most likely to talk about groups of people in a stereotypical way? Why?

The Contender

Chapter 1

Vocabulary

mimicked – reproduced or copied behavior or speech; copied with the intent of teasing
perpetual – endless; continuous
plunged – thrown or flung with force
shambling – walking in a clumsy, awkward, or blundering manner
sneered – made a mocking facial expression that showed dislike or disrespect
sprawled – sitting or lying down stretched out in a random or clumsy way
stunted – slowed or stalled; underdeveloped
swaggered – walked or strutted to boast or show arrogance
transistor – an electronic device with a speaker used to make louder or detect

1. What is the setting of the story?

2. Why does Alfred go searching for James?

3. What do the following descriptive phrases reveal to the reader about Major?

- “Major was flexing his arm muscles at the cracked mirror over the mop sink.”
- “Major folded his arms across his bulging T-shirt.”
- “Major swaggered across the room, the metal tips on his pointed shoes clicking on the concrete floor.”

Chapter 4

Vocabulary

lapsed – returned to the former state; no longer succeeding
listlessness – sluggishness; a lack of energy
nationalist – a dedicated supporter of independence; a patriot
serenely – calmly; peacefully
tinge – a hint or touch of a color or quality
wicker – a twig-like material used to make baskets or furniture

1. What is the purpose of the nationalist rally Alfred passes?

2. In what ways does Uncle Wilson think the world is changing? What advice does he give to Alfred? How does Alfred feel about Wilson’s advice?

3. Lipsyte uses short choppy sentences when he is expressing Alfred’s thoughts. Find an example of this sentence style in this chapter. What mood does it convey to the reader?

4. Why does Alfred borrow his aunt’s alarm clock and set it for five-thirty?

Chapter 12

Vocabulary

accelerator – a mechanism for increasing speed

glinting – shining for a brief moment

mingled – mixed or combined; socialized

silhouetted – shown as a dark outline of an object or person on a light backdrop

1. The sentence, “They don’t get you one way, they get you another,” appears twice in this chapter. For what reasons is it true for Alfred both times?

2. Why does Alfred avoid Henry when Henry walks into the store?

3. How will Alfred and Mr. Donatelli know if Alfred has what it takes to be a good fighter?
