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Prestwick House
Literature
Teaching Unit
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Souder

by William Howard Armstrong

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



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Sounder

Note to the Teacher

The story is set in the South shortly after the Civil War. African Americans are free from slavery but are badly abused and oppressed by the rest of society. They are harassed by the law and trampled by overwhelming poverty. Few African American families are literate since education is not easily accessible to them; consequently, they have very little hope of escaping the cycle of poverty they are in. Strong prejudice is portrayed through inhumane treatment and offensive, derogatory language, both of which were common practices at the time. While these social injustices are depressing, this story is about one family's courage, faith, and survival.

This novel's protagonist derives a great deal of comfort from his mother's spirituality and her stories of Biblical heroes. These stories, discussed throughout the book, are essential to the plot and important to the boy's understanding of justice and safety; however, they do not require prior knowledge or additional explanation, beyond a comparison between the heroes and the boy. The emphasis is placed upon heroic and honorable characteristics, as well as the understanding that God will take care of the boy and his family.

All references come from the Harper Trophy edition of *Sounder*, published 1995.

Sounder

Objectives

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

1. infer information (or conclusions) about characters and events when these meanings are not explicitly stated.
2. define third-person narration and discuss how the novel is a story being told by a teacher, in third-person narrative, to a student.
3. point out examples of the use of metaphors in the story.
4. identify the following symbols in the story:
 - windows as a symbol of potential opportunities or new lives;
 - chains as a symbol for the restraints of poverty and bigotry;
 - the color red as a symbol for anger.
5. to recognize how the author uses flashback to provide background information about the characters.
6. discuss the author's style of writing and point out why the author chooses to omit names for any of the characters.
7. support or refute by citing incidents or comments from the book the idea that this is a loss of innocence novel.
8. support or refute the following thematic idea by referring to the text: A person must remember the good things, learn to accept the bad, and then get on with life.
9. support or refute the following theme: Each person must take responsibility for finding a path in life.
10. discuss the extent to which bigotry and prejudice play a role in this story.
11. support or refute the idea that the courage to struggle and survive is within us but that we must draw on it.
12. discuss the reasons that the author chooses to name the novel after the dog rather than the boy.
13. identify the role of quests in this novel.

Sounder

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. How does the story of David and Goliath give the boy hope of breaking out of the restrictions the white world puts on his future? What will be the “stone” the boy throws at the restrictions for his future?
2. Compare the story of Cyrus with Sounder’s loyalty to the father. How do they both support the theme that friendship is more valuable than wealth or power?
3. What do each of the following items symbolize in the story?
 - A. windows
 - B. color red
 - C. chains
4. Identify the qualities that Sounder possesses that make him a good hunting dog. How does the boy’s father first get the dog?
5. Support or refute the following statement by citing events from the story: The boy’s father is more a victim of poverty and desperation than a thief.
6. Why do you think this story is told in third person by an adult narrator rather than in first person by the young boy?
7. What does the flashback of the trip to the city to sell mistletoe reveal about the boy’s father?
8. All of the characters in the story are nameless. Discuss how this technique adds a universal quality to the story.
9. Write a brief character sketch of the boy’s mother. How do her actions in the story reflect the theme that people must take responsibility for their own survival?
10. Support or refute the following statement with examples from the story: On his quest to find his father, the boy finds his own path in life.
11. Trace the scope of the boy’s world from the beginning of the novel to the end. How does this growth support this as a loss-of-innocence novel?

Sounder

Author's Note

1. What do you know about the author's background from the author's note?

2. The story the black teacher tells is about a dog, Sounder. Explain the following quotation: "It was history—his history."

3. By comparing Sounder to Odysseus' dog, Argus, the author implies that Sounder will have what characteristics?

4. What is the picture that the author draws of this nameless African American man?

5. What allusion is made in the note and what does that add to the picture of this gray-haired black man?

CHAPTER TWO

VOCABULARY

ashen – sickly pale, having lost normal, healthy color

constrained – held back, lacking the usual energy

floundering – struggling to stand up and move, flopping around in an uncontrollable manner

plaintive – full of suffering and sorrow

1. What evidence do the men have against the boy’s father?

2. What confuses the boy about the following statement: “Stick out your hands, boy.”?

3. What does the boy’s surprise tell the reader about the boy’s understanding of prejudice?

4. Why does Souder not alert the family to the arrival of the strangers?

5. How does the boy search for Souder in the woods?

CHAPTER FOUR

VOCABULARY

- chute** – a hallway through which animals walk in a barn
- mange** – an itchy skin disease, usually suffered by animals
- perkish** – a slang term for cheerful and optimistic
- poultice** – a medicinal paste applied to a wound to enable healing
- tannery** – a place where animal hides are turned into leather

1. What part of the cabin is a symbol in this story and what does it symbolize?

2. Give two examples of the boy's hopeful attitude.

3. What hope does his mother have for Souder's continued survival?
