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Literature
Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide

The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail

by Jerome Lawrence
and Robert E. Lee

- 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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The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail

Objectives

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

1. define literary terms associated with drama and be able to cite examples of each term from this play.
2. define important vocabulary words used in the play and be able to use them correctly in context.
3. recognize examples of foreshadowing; speculate on what each example might be foreshadowing.
4. recognize examples of dialect and be able to explain why the author would choose to use dialect.
5. explain the importance of word choice; cite several examples where the author uses a particular word or way of phrasing something to create a particular effect.
6. pick out significant events, scenes, or speeches and explain their significance to the play as a whole.
7. cite several instances of irony and explain why each is ironic.
8. recognize crucial events in the play including important conflicts which lead (rising action) to the climax.
9. explain how the author resolves (or does not resolve) the various conflicts brought up during the course of the plot.
10. discuss how the staging influences the way in which the action can occur.
11. recognize several important quotes and explain their importance to the general understanding of the play.
12. discuss the importance of several of the minor characters to the success of the plot.
13. make inferences from information implied by the author rather than directly stated.
14. interpret stage directions and explain what the playwrights intended by using those directions.
15. cite several facts about Thoreau learned through reading the play.

The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Discuss the title the playwrights have chosen for this play. Explain why this is or is not an appropriate name for the story contained within its pages.
2. Discuss the time period during which this play takes place. How long a period does the action in the play really cover? How do the playwrights convey the passage of time?
3. Thoreau's mother and brother are very important characters, both in Henry's life and to the play as a whole. Briefly describe each character and discuss their influences on Henry personally and on the play in general.
4. Each character in this story plays an important role in developing the plot as well as helping the audience view Henry. Choose one male and one female character (not including his mother or brother) and show how each one is influential in the play's development and in revealing aspects of Henry's character.
5. The concept of Transcendentalism plays an active role in the play. Choose one or two situations or characters that reveal information about Transcendentalism and briefly describe what you have learned about this philosophy.
6. Describe the interactions between Henry and Ellen. What does each character seem to want from the other?
7. Bailey is an interesting character. Pick out two or three significant scenes where Bailey says or does something important to the course of the play.
8. There are many times in this play when Henry believes people are being treated unfairly. Focusing on three instances where there is injustice, explain the situation briefly and state why Henry believes this situation to be unjust. Explain why you agree or disagree with him.
9. The Thoreau brothers seem to have a good relationship with each other. Find several examples where it is evident that they think highly of each other. How does their relationship compare to the one each has with their mother?
10. Compare how people in town relate to Henry to how they relate to John. What is it about each of these brothers that people like or dislike?
11. This play is entitled *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*, although much of its action takes place at times other than the one night Thoreau actually was incarcerated. Discuss the use of flashbacks, the technique of dividing the stage and having several things going on at the same time, and any other device you think the playwrights have used to tamper with the constraints of time and the stage in order to suit their purpose.

The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail

Act I

(Pages 1 – 9)

Vocabulary

abides – lives, resides
amiable – friendly, sociable, agreeable
atheism – disbelief in God, skepticism
brandishes – wields, flourishes, flaunts
cantankerous – irritable, unreasonable, bad-tempered
condescended – patronized, lowered oneself, stooped
conformity – conventionality, traditionalism
conniption – temper tantrum, fit
conviction – strong belief
crescendo – swelling, build-up, climax
croup – respiratory illness involving deep coughing
devastating – overwhelming
ethic – example of morality, justice, fairness
inalienable – undeniable, indisputable, unchallengeable
individuality – uniqueness, distinctness, independence
indomitably – stubbornly, resolutely, unswervingly
ineptitude – incompetence, ineffectiveness, uselessness
pantomimes – acts out without using words or sounds
paroxysm – convulsion, spasm, outburst
patrician – aristocratic, noble, upper class
pompously – arrogantly, pretentiously, snobbishly
radiance – sparkle, glow, vivacity
saunters – strolls, walks
sonnet – poem composed of fourteen lines with a set rhythm and rhyme pattern
Transcendentalism – belief that one can go beyond the senses, that people have a spark of divinity in them
transfixed – mesmerized, hypnotized, fascinated

- The very first words you read in this play are stage directions—information given to the director and actors as to where things should be and how certain actions should take place. Choose two of the directions on page one and explain what the playwrights are trying to accomplish with each.

33. The action moves immediately to the Emersons' home where Henry, Waldo, and Lydian are discussing work. What kind of work is it, and who will be doing it?

34. In his conversation about work, Henry reveals his disdain for money. How? He then asks for a different type of payment. What does he want and why?

35. What do the flute music and the "leafy-green projection" indicate?

36. Find a quotation that explains what Thoreau thinks of planning and saving for retirement?

(Pages 86 – 99)

7. What is Henry’s opinion of lawyers?

8. Who is Williams and when do we meet him?

9. The appearance of Williams allows us to see Henry’s reaction to slavery. It is a scene through which we can view another of Henry’s deeply held beliefs. Explain.

10. Henry becomes very upset with Waldo in the next scene, continuing an idea that was presented at the end of the first act. What idea is Henry putting forward, and what does he want Waldo to do?

11. Why does Waldo call Henry his “walking ethic?”

12. Waldo and Henry get into quite a serious argument. What side does each take and how is this argument resolved?

13. What happens “this afternoon in Concord Square”?
