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## Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



### Ordinary People

by Judith Guest

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



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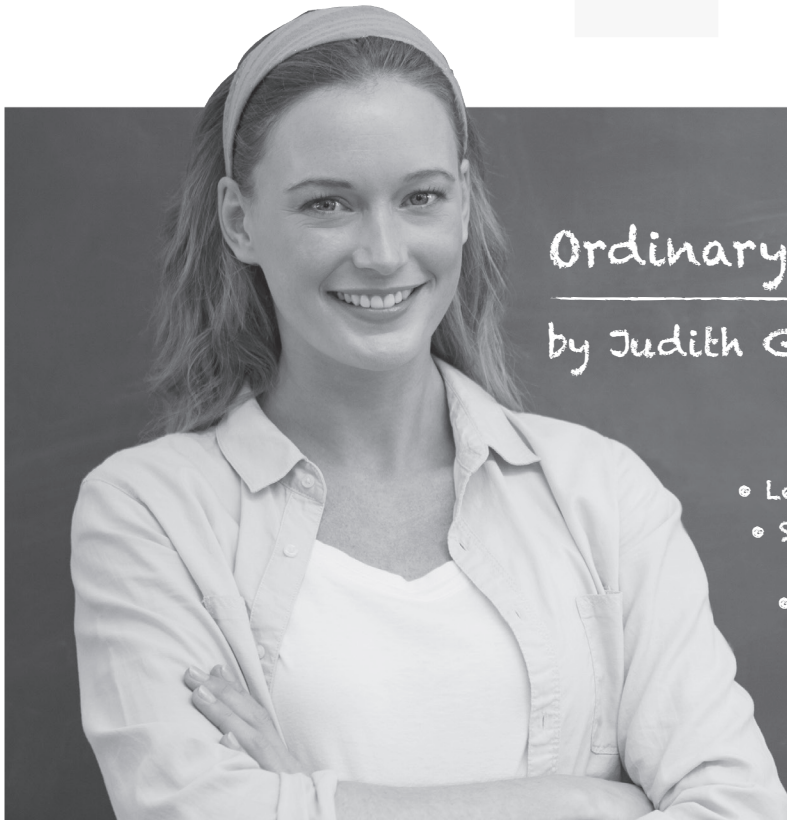
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 **Prestwick House**

P.O. Box 658, Clayton, DE 19938  
[www.prestwickhouse.com](http://www.prestwickhouse.com)  
800.932.4593

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# Ordinary People

## Objectives

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

1. recognize figures of speech, including
  - metaphor
  - simile
  - personification
  - irony
  - theme
2. understand how the author's word choice advances the theme.
3. recognize the author's intent in italicizing the characters' inner thoughts and dreams.
4. analyze each chapter's narrative voice.
5. compare and contrast the characters of Conrad and Jordan/Buck.
6. compare and contrast the characters of Conrad's father (Calvin) and mother (Beth).
7. identify how perfectionism and fear of failure figure in Conrad and also his father's life and worldview.
8. understand the author's purpose in gradually unfolding the events that happened the year before the story takes place.
9. explain how the theme of forgiveness is woven through the narrative, citing specific examples.
10. elaborate on the significance of the book's title in light of the plot, and explain how irony is present in the title.
11. explain how the family dynamics in the Jarrett household affect Conrad's emotional problems.
12. discuss how the theme of loss pervades the narrative, by giving specific examples from the text.
13. cite the event that triggers Conrad's breakdown and explain why he reacts to it as he does.

# Ordinary People

## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. There are many references in *Ordinary People* to Conrad not being “like his old self.” How does the narrator seem to view selfhood and a person’s sense of self? Which character best expresses view of selfhood?
2. Throughout the novel, the pervasive mood is one of menace and danger. Give specific examples of dialogue and figurative language that convey this mood.
3. Conrad’s parents do not agree on how to treat him now that he is home from the mental hospital. Explain their differing approaches to their surviving son and how these different child-rearing strategies affect their relationship.
4. How did Calvin’s upbringing compare to his son’s? Be specific.
5. Compare and contrast the characters of Conrad and Jordan. Delve into their different approaches to athletics, friends, chores, and risk-taking. Cite particular passages in the novel to back up your position.
6. How can you tell which character’s voice is narrating each chapter? How does the author’s technique of alternating narrative voices give the novel greater depth?
7. Explain how Conrad’s reaction to his fight with Stillman in Chapter 22 exemplifies the Jarrett family’s feelings about rules, control, punishment, and forgiveness.
8. The characters in *Ordinary People* live their lives on both an outer, superficial level and an inner, deeper level, where they try to come to terms with their own feelings. Give three examples from the novel in which there is a clash between the outer and the inner levels, and tell how the characters resolve those clashes.

# Ordinary People

## Chapter 1

### Vocabulary

**antagonize** – to provoke hostility

**deface** – to damage the external appearance of something

**musings** – turning something over and over in the mind without reaching a conclusion

**prickly** – stinging; troublesome

**synchronizing** – arranging events so they happen at exactly the same time

**tendrils** – shoots of new growth on a plant

**undermining** – weakening or eroding secretly

1. “The small seed of despair cracks open and sends experimental tendrils upward to the fragile skin of calm holding him together. Are You on the Right Road?” What does this quotation tell you about the narrator’s state of mind?

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2. The author hints at something bad that must have happened to the narrator. She doesn’t say exactly what it is, but how does she give readers the impression that the narrator is having a difficult time as a result of something in his recent past? Be specific in your answer.

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3. Toward the end of the chapter, the narrator says, “Get the motions right. Motives will follow. That is Faith.” How do the words motions/motives reflect Conrad’s state of mind at this point in the story? What does the line “That is Faith” mean in this context?

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## Chapter 4

### Vocabulary

**annuities** – financial tools used for investing  
**commitment** – placement in an institution (usually a mental institution)  
**frequents** – goes to a place often  
**loopholes** – legal ways in which to get out of doing something  
**pathetic** – evoking pity  
**rapping** – knocking  
**slick** – glossy; as in coated paper  
**stupor** – a state of greatly dulled senses; a daze

1. Where does Beth want the family to spend Christmas this year?

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2. The author uses particular words and phrases to reveal personality traits of each character. Which of Calvin's character traits come through in this passage about his view of how he goes to work? Be specific about the author's word choice in your answer. "But Cal prefers his car. It gives him control over his schedule, and, besides, riding the train has always made him nervous....Riding the train gives him too much time to think, he has decided. Too much thinking can ruin you."

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3. Readers finally learn the background to the story in Chapter 4: the death of one son (Jordan, also known as Buck) and the commitment of the other (Conrad) to a mental hospital, following a suicide attempt. Why does the author wait until the fourth chapter to disclose this information? What purpose does it serve to drop hints about these events leading up to this disclosure? Cite specific points in the narrative in Chapters 1–4 to back up your argument.

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## Chapter 13

### Vocabulary

**clenched** – held tight  
**deft** – characterized by skill  
**disjointed** – lacking an orderly sequence  
**wellspring** – a source of continuous supply

1. A major family argument erupts in Chapter 13. What sparks the argument? In his anger, Conrad lashes out at his mother for something that happened the previous summer. What was it?

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2. After the argument, the author says of Beth, “She does not turn around, nor does she make a sign that she has heard him [Calvin].” How does this echo the “signs” that Calvin keeps looking for in Conrad?

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3. What do you think about the discussion between Calvin and Conrad about the way Beth is and has been in the past?

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