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Sample

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Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide

Nickel and Dime

by Barbara Ehrenreich

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

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Nickel and Dime

Note to the Teacher

Nickel and Dime is a nonfiction book that examines the experiences and financial difficulties of people who work low-wage jobs. Barbara Ehrenreich worked multiple jobs that paid very little, from waitress to house cleaner to Wal-Mart sales associate, in an attempt to earn enough money to live on. This account of her experiences reveals the disparity between the labor that workers put into their jobs and the minimal earnings they receive in return. Ehrenreich highlights the lack of affordable housing in America and how difficult it is for people to receive aid, particularly after the welfare reform that occurred in 1996. She reveals how underpaid and underappreciated low-wage workers struggle to survive financially.

It is important to note that this work contains some profanity and references to drugs, alcohol, and sex.

Barbara Ehrenreich was born in Butte, Montana, in 1941, when it was a blue-collar mining town. She moved around frequently as a child when her family reached middle-class status. In 1963, Ehrenreich graduated from Reed College with a degree in physics and went on to obtain a PhD in cellular biology from Rockefeller University. In the early 1970s, she became involved in political and social activism by advocating for the women's health movement. She then began her career as a full-time writer and published her first article in *Ms. magazine*. Ehrenreich has since had a number of columns and essays published in sources including *Mother Jones*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *TIME Magazine*. She has written and co-authored over twenty nonfiction books and has received a number of awards.

All references come from the Picador edition of *Nickel and Dime*, copyright 2011.

Nickel and Dimed

Objectives

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

1. understand the economic difficulties low-wage workers experience.
2. discuss how welfare reform affected recipients.
3. identify stereotypes of low-wage workers and compare them to Ehrenreich's descriptions of her coworkers.
4. explain how lower-paying jobs affect the physical and mental health of workers.
5. discuss whether unionization would improve the situation faced by these workers.
6. explain how Ehrenreich's citation of sources lends credence to her assertions.
7. discuss how Ehrenreich's decisions affected her ability to save money for the next month's rent.
8. analyze the effect of Ehrenreich's rhetorical questions and direct addresses to the reader.
9. define the following literary terms and identify examples of them within the text:
 - allusion
 - metaphor
 - repetition
 - simile
10. understand Ehrenreich's Marxist views toward workers, corporations, and consumers.
11. write a short essay describing the relationship between employees and management.
12. analyze Ehrenreich's diction and the tone it creates.
13. identify how race and ethnicity determine the types of jobs people obtain.

Nickel and Dimed

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Ehrenreich wrote *Nickel and Dimed* during a time of relative prosperity. Discuss how the lives of low-wage workers are likely affected by economic recessions.
2. Though the Introduction is written in past tense, the other chapters are written in the present tense. Why do you think Ehrenreich decided to use these tenses, and what are the effects in terms of the pacing of the book?
3. How do the footnotes and citations of studies contribute to the persuasiveness of Ehrenreich's writing?
4. While working in Key West, Ehrenreich occasionally went out and visited friends from her everyday life. How do these visits affect her dedication to and the credibility of her social experiment?
5. Discuss the ways in which employers have tried to increase efficiency in the hiring process and on the job. How does this increased efficiency affect employees or potential employees?
6. Despite the many "help wanted" ads, jobs in Portland pay no better than positions elsewhere do. What do these low wages suggest about how companies view and treat employees?
7. Ehrenreich notes that maids are more likely to be disregarded or looked down upon than other low-wage employees are. Why do you think maids are treated so poorly? How might the roles of their job factor into their treatment?
8. How do corporate mentalities and high turnover rates of workers affect the relationships between employers and employees?
9. How do companies make it difficult for employees to negotiate for better pay or hours?
10. Different types of low-wage jobs are divided along ethnic and racial lines. Debate the extent to which this division may be practical, in terms of communication, and how much it may be based on prejudice.
11. Who do you think is the primary audience for this work? Discuss whether this book appeals to multiple demographics.

unencumbered – not slowed down; not having burdens
wonks – people who study and are highly knowledgeable in a subject

1. Why does Ehrenreich mention the price of her “\$30 lunch” of “salmon and field greens”?

2. What main effect of welfare reform does Ehrenreich mention?

3. Why is Ehrenreich particularly reluctant to research the difficulties of poverty by working low-paying jobs?

4. How does Ehrenreich’s scientific background influence her decision to go undercover as a journalist?

5. Ehrenreich expresses her willingness to “get [her] hands dirty.” Identify this literary term and analyze how it affects the tone of the narrative.

25. Ehrenreich calls the kitchen at Jerry's "a stomach leading to the lower intestine that is the garbage and dishwashing area." Identify the literary device used here and explain its significance.

26. Ehrenreich states that smokers create "an atmosphere in which oxygen is only an occasional pollutant." This line is an example of what literary term?

27. Why might workers continue to smoke, despite the health hazards?

28. Ehrenreich states that "the Industrial Revolution is not an easy transition." Identify the literary devices used in this comment and explain their significance.

29. How does Ehrenreich fare while working two jobs?

proliferating – multiplying; quickly increasing in number
recalcitrant – resistant; hard to deal with
recuperate – to recover from an illness or injury
stagnant – not moving or changing
stead – advantage
stratum – a level of society made up of people with the same status
tedium – boredom
torrent – a heavy stream
ubiquitous – widespread; seemingly existing everywhere
unilaterally – undertaken by only one person or side
unremitting – constant; incessant; not stopping or lessening
unstinting – generous; not holding back

1. Why are unskilled jobs not “truly ‘unskilled’ ”?

2. What social skills are involved in low-wage jobs?

3. Why do these workers feel like they must conceal their full capabilities?

4. Contrast Ehrenreich’s success at her jobs with her success with her finances.
