

Grade Eleven – Summer Reading Thought Questions

COMING OF AGE IN MISSISSIPPI

by Anne Moody

Moody's autobiography offers a stark contrast to the image of post-war affluence and prosperity that is widely associated with the 1950s (consider some of the television shows from the fifties that you might have seen on "Nick at Night").

1. What does Moody's autobiography tell us about the "other side of the 1950s"? In what ways is Moody "not June Cleaver"?
2. What experiences were formative in the development of Anne Moody's identity as an African American and as a woman? Are there certain events in either her childhood or youth that stand out as having shaped her understanding of herself? What motivated her to join the movement?
3. The book provides a look at the Black freedom struggle from a youth perspective. What does it tell us about splits within the Black community regarding the civil rights movement? For instance, how do her family and other Blacks in Canton react to her activism? How did she view the ministers? What is the reason for this conflict? What was Moody's responsibility to her family? To the larger Black freedom struggle? Should she have withdrawn from her activities because of the danger to her community? Why or why not?
4. What were the particular problems and advantages of being a woman in the movement? What does the book reveal about the organizational structure of the civil rights movement? What about women's roles within the movement?

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BREAD GIVERS by Anzia Yeziarska

1. Discuss how *Bread Givers* is a novel about the urban immigrant experience, whose social realities include poverty, family tension, and the ambiguity of success.
2. Discuss how the novel is also about the working-class experience. How do Sara and her sisters fit into the family economy? What kind of work does each do? How does each understand her work life? In other words, what does work mean to each? What does it offer each and how does it limit each?
3. Sara, the novel's protagonist, vows to "make herself for a person," which she attempts to do by becoming "Americanized." What does becoming American mean to Sara? How does it contrast with her own Jewish/Polish culture? What are the conflicts she encounters by being part of two cultures, the new American world and the old European one?
4. How does the novel illustrate the meaning of the "American Dream"? What is the American Promise that Sara works so hard for? What dreams and hopes drive the other characters in the novel? Consider Sara's parents, her sisters, suitors.
5. Discuss how Sara, in contrast to her sisters and mother, emerges as an independent, strong-willed woman. How does she do this? What values and goals guide her? What makes the other women in the novel less successful in their search for self-determinism?
6. Discuss how the novel ends with the theme of reconciliation between the search for self and family duty.

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THE GREAT GATSBY **by F. Scott Fitzgerald**

1. Explain the significance of the title *The Great Gatsby*. In what ways could Jay Gatsby be considered “great”? In what ways could the title be ironic? In other words, what is not “great” about Gatsby and his world?
2. *The Great Gatsby* is a novel about the disillusionment of the “American Dream.” Be prepared to discuss how Jay Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan and Tom Buchanan are all victims of dreams that are unattainable for some reason.
3. The novel’s narrator, Nick Carraway, describes the Buchanans (Tom and Daisy) as “careless people.” Be prepared to discuss how not only Tom and Daisy could be considered “careless” but also Gatsby, Mr. & Mrs. Wilson and even Nick himself.
4. Throughout the novel, there are many descriptions of New York City as a kind of “waste land.” Be prepared to discuss how not only the city but also Gatsby and his friends are filled with despair, frustration and hopelessness.

THE THINGS THEY CARRIED **by Tim O'Brien**

1.

*"They carried all they could bear,
and then some, including a silent awe
for the terrible power of the things they carried."*

In this passage, Tim O'Brien refers to the tangible, and more importantly, the intangible things being carried by his fellow soldiers during, and in some cases, after the war in Vietnam. Consider at least five of the following characters in terms of the intangible burdens they carried.

Lieutenant Jimmy Cross	Kiowa
Rat (Bob) Kiley	Henry Dobbins
Ted Lavender	Tim O'Brien
Mitchell Sanders	Lee Strunk
Norman Bowker	Dave Jensen

2. When O'Brien was drafted in 1968, he was, in his own words, "politically naive," yet he felt the American war in Vietnam was "wrong":

"It was in my view then, and still is, that you don't make war without knowing why...it seemed to me that when a nation goes to war it must have a reasonable confidence in the justice and imperative of its cause."

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Consider several events O'Brien relates in terms of this quote. In other words, how was the war unjust-without moral imperative, for the author and any other character(s)?

- 2.a. Do you think there are wars that are just and imperative? If not, why not? If so, which ones and why? How do you personally feel about America's involvement in Vietnam?
3. O'Brien almost evades the draft by running away to Canada, but eventually he returns home and goes to war. Why? Do you think his reasons are good, bad, understandable? Why do you think O'Brien includes this segment of his life in the novel?
4. One of O'Brien's major themes is that war-just or unjust, changes those who fight in ways that they could never anticipate or even understand because:

"it (the war) makes you lose a sense of the definite to the point where you can't tell where you are, or why you're there, and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity."

How do O'Brien and any other character(s) lose a sense of themselves-either temporarily or permanently as a result of the war?

5. What are the circumstances surrounding O'Brien's killing of the young Vietcong soldier? Why does he relate the death in such graphic detail? Why does he imagine the life and personality of this man who was an enemy and a stranger to him?
6. Why does O'Brien relate his childhood love in a story about Vietnam? Who was Linda? What happened to her? How does she fit in with the rest of the novel?
7. Many years after the war, O'Brien's daughter asks her father why he is always writing about Vietnam. Although it is not initially clear to O'Brien why he does, he ultimately tells the reader that telling the stories of his friends (and enemies) is a way to give tribute, ask forgiveness, and find peace. Explain how.

Note: The novel contains images and language that are, at times, violent and profane. According to Tim O'Brien, such graphic story telling is a deliberate means by which to convey what he calls "the truth" about his experience.