

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Contender

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The Contender

Notes

In this coming of age story, Alfred Brooks is a young high school dropout living in Harlem, New York. He does menial labor in a grocery store during the day and goes to the movies with his best friend James every Friday night. His life seems empty and purposeless. Things change for Alfred when his friends begin to pressure him to help them rob the grocery store. Alfred resists, but James is arrested for the crime. Alfred is at a crossroads. He can succumb to the peer pressure, or he can learn to think for himself. He starts training at Donatelli's Gym. Alfred learns to rely on his personal strength and, by doing so, gains insight into his relationships with his family, community, and James.

This novel is recommended for middle school and younger high school students. Some students may wish to read the sequel—*The Brave* and its follow-up *The Chief*. There are numerous references to characters using drugs; these instances are integral to the plot and are not portrayed glamorously or in anything but a negative light.

Note: All references come from the Harper Trophy edition of *The Contender*, copyright 1967.

The Contender

Objectives

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

1. infer ideas about characters and events, when these meanings are not explicitly stated.
2. discuss the author's style of writing, including the ways he uses descriptive phrases and short sentences to help convey the mood of the story.
3. point out examples of digression in the story and understand the ways this technique helps to prepare the reader for future action.
4. recognize the following literary terms: metaphor, simile, protagonist, personification, symbol, stereotype, allusion, climax, foil, theme, coming of age.
5. discuss the following as symbols in the story:
 - Henry
 - the stairs leading to Donatelli's gym.
6. identify the climax of the story.
7. cite incidents from the story to show that James is a foil for the protagonist.
8. point out examples of stereotyping in the story.
9. discuss the way the author uses allusion to make the story believable.
10. understand the significance of the title of the novel.
11. cite incidents from the story to support the following overall theme: The measure of people is not whether they win, but the effort they make to succeed.
12. discuss the following generalizations about life and cite incidents from the story showing the extent to which Alfred applies these lessons to his life:
 - A man must control his fear to make it work for him.
 - It is worse for a man to quit before he really tries than it is for a man to fail.
 - A young man must be ready for opportunities when they arise.
 - A man must learn to do things for himself.
 - A man must think for himself.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Describe the setting for the story.
2. Which incident in the novel marks the climax of the story?
3. James and Alfred are childhood friends, but they take different paths as young men. What are some of the factors in the lives of each of these young men which might account for this difference?
4. In what sense are Henry and James similar? What does Henry do that surprises James?
5. For what reasons does Aunt Pearl both approve and disapprove of Alfred's decision to learn to fight?
6. Discuss the ways Mr. Donatelli, Mr. Epstein, and Spoon all act as mentors for Alfred. In what way might Alfred become a mentor himself?
7. Who is the antagonist in the story? To what extent is Alfred able to resist this influence?
8. Read the following description of the stairs leading to Donatelli's Gym. What might they symbolize in the story?

“He [Alfred] hit the first step, feeling it sag under him, but he kept going, up wooden steps worn so smooth his loafers slipped backwards, but the chilly legs were getting warmer now. Put one after another, Alfred, panting, huffing, low steps but hundreds of them, thousands of them in the darkness, the stairs so steep he sometimes fell to all fours, scrambling higher, past the sign, DR. COREY, past the sign GYM-THIRD FLOOR, faster until his breath tangled in his ribs, higher until his throat was dry, faster, higher, until a door loomed before him.”

9. Cite incidents from the story to support the idea that this is a coming-of-age story for Alfred. Discuss whether or not it is also a coming-of-age story for Henry.
10. Find examples of each of the following literary devices in the story: simile, metaphor, personification, allusion, symbol, foreshadowing, theme.
11. Discuss the significance of the title and whether or not Alfred becomes “a contender” by the end of the story.
12. Find an example of the author use of stream of consciousness to give the reader a view into Alfred's thoughts. How does this technique also help to add realism to the story?

Chapter 2

1. Why does Alfred think it is his fault that James is in jail?

2. Descriptive imagery helps to create a mood. For example: Aunt Pearl's voice is described as "warm and light," "husky and tired." The reader understands from this that Aunt Pearl is normally a warm, happy person, but that she feels sad and tired because Alfred has been injured. Find another example in this chapter of descriptive imagery which helps the reader to understand the quality of Alfred's home life.

3. Cite an incident from the story to prove or disprove the following statement: Alfred feels disconnected from the world outside of Harlem.

4. Describe the neighborhood Alfred and his family live in. What hazards or obstacles does Alfred encounter when he tries to leave the apartment?

5. Why does Spoon stop boxing?

6. Cite incidents from the story to prove or disprove the following statement: Mr. Donatelli is a good mentor for these young men because he cares about them.

7. Why do you suppose Alfred is finally able to thank Henry for carrying him home?
