

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

**The Killer Angels**

by Michael Shaara

written by Dan Welch

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## Introduction

*The Killer Angels* is the story of the Battle of Gettysburg as told from the point of view of two Union and three Confederate officers who were each present at the key moments in the three day battle. Each of these men has to make at least one crucial decision that affects the outcome of the battle. These decisions are based not only on their experiences of war but also on the basic nature of their personalities.

The battlefield and the course of combat are quite complicated, so the many maps that are included should be studied to add clarity to the narrative descriptions. A list of military terms and definitions that recur throughout the book have been included for readers who may not be familiar with military organizations or tactics.

Shaara is interested in the decision-making and motivations of both officers and enlisted men. We learn how they look forward to the battle with a certain eagerness and then how they experience and react to the horror of war.

The facts in this book (terrain, time of day, combat situations, location of the main characters and casualties) are all historically accurate. The actual conversations among participants are based on fragmentary records and published recollections written long after the events. The thoughts and feelings of these characters are, for the most part, from Shaara's imagination, although they are based on what can be determined about the attitudes, perspectives and inclinations of the men involved.

All references come from the Random House edition of *The Killer Angels*, copyright 2003.

### **About the Author**

Michael Shaara was born in 1928 in Jersey City, New Jersey. The son of Italian immigrants, he became a teacher as well as a writer. He made his living as a writer of short stories. He also wrote several novels, but none was a commercial success, not even *The Killer Angels* which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1975. After Shaara's premature death, the book became a best seller when it was used as the basis for the movie *Gettysburg*. His son Jeff later added two books about the battles between these two armies that occurred before and after the Battle of Gettysburg.

### Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Describe the decision that General Buford has to make at Cemetery Hill when he first arrives in Gettysburg and analyze the decision he makes.
2. Discuss the differences of opinion between the North and the South about the reasons for the war.
3. Describe the relationship between Joshua Chamberlain and his brother. How is this affected by the experience of war?
4. Discuss the meaning of the title in relation to the central theme of the book.
5. Explain the differences between Lee and Longstreet about how the coming battle should be fought.
6. Discuss the role of Freemantle in the story and the perspective he provides.
7. Discuss the effect of Jeb Stuart's absence on the Army of Northern Virginia at the Battle of Gettysburg.
8. Describe and analyze Longstreet's decisions on the second day of the battle.
9. Analyze and explain Chamberlain's decisions while he is defending Little Round Top.
10. Discuss the meaning and importance of "honor" to soldiers on the Confederate side of the battle.
11. Give specific examples of references to music, especially among the Confederates and explain the effect of the particular type of music on the men.
12. Explain Lee's final decision to attack the Union center on the third day of the battle.
13. Describe Garnett's attitude and behavior during the attack of Pickett's division.

# The Killer Angels

## Foreword

The Foreword introduces the reader to the general nature of the two armies that will face each other at Gettysburg in July of 1863. It also provides brief biographical sketches of the men who will be the major characters in this book. The story deals with conflict, not only between the armies, but also between officers and sometimes within individuals as well. Students may find it helpful to refer to the Foreword from time to time as new major characters are introduced.

1. Why is a careful reading of the foreword important?

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2. Describe the Army of Northern Virginia as they moved to invade the North.

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3. What does Shaara mean when he says that the Southern Army is fighting for “disunion”?

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4. Describe the Army of the Potomac.

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### Chapter 4: Longstreet

#### VOCABULARY

**grimaced** – made a face indicating distaste or disgust  
**handlebar moustache** – a long moustache that looks like a bicycle’s handlebars  
**inside straight** – a poker hand that is very hard to get  
**lee’s Miserables** – a play on Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables* (The Miserable Ones), a famous French novel

1. Why is Freemantle included in the story?

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2. What does Longstreet think about as he watches the poker game?

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3. Describe George Pickett’s arrival at Longstreet’s camp.

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## Thursday, July 2, 1863: The Second Day

### Chapter 1: Freemantle

#### VOCABULARY

**aristocracy** – those who are automatically considered to be in the highest social class  
**breastworks** – hastily built defensive works soldiers build on the battlefield  
**laconically** – with as few words as possible  
**premonition** – a spooky feeling something is about to happen

1. The description of the second day of the battle begins with the focus on Freemantle. Why?

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2. Freemantle’s characterization develops as the story progresses. What details enrich the characterization as the second day begins?

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3. When Freemantle looks at the position of the Union troops, what is the setting for the battle to come?

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4. As Freemantle waits for the battle to begin, what does he decide is the basic cause of the war?

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