

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Ordinary People

by Judith Guest

written by Diana Drew

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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.

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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.

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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?

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.

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?

Chapter 5

Vocabulary

debris – remnants left after a natural or human-made disaster
furred – worn down to a furry edge
placebos – pills that do not have any real medicine in them
prowl – to move stealthily
reigns – rules; controls
stay – to head off
stenographer – a person who takes notes word for word, as in a courtroom

1. When Conrad visits the psychiatrist's office, he notes that "He is being strangled" and "Panic begins to settle around him." Why do you think he is having this reaction?

2. At the end of Conrad's first session with Dr. Berger, he wonders, "So, how do you stay open, when nobody mentions anything, when everybody is careful not to mention it? "Ah... Jarrett, what do you want? Want people to say, 'Gee we're glad you didn't die?' Poor taste, poor taste." What is Conrad implying here about the interaction within his family?

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?

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?

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

Chapter 23

Vocabulary

entwined – tangled up
gibberish – nonsensical speech

1. How do Calvin's musings about communication and getting a message across, at the beginning of the chapter, relate to Conrad's telling him about the fistfight at school?

2. Why does Conrad gloss over the reason for the fight, when Calvin asks him what the fight was about?
