

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

Ordinary People

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Ordinary People

All references are taken from the Penguin edition of *Ordinary People*. Published by the Penguin Group. New York. Copyright 1976, Judith Guest.

Note to Teacher: This novel contains strong language and descriptions of teenage suicide attempts, teenage sexual activity, and underage drinking.

Pre-Reading

1. Read several times the poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay that appears before the title page, "Sonnet CLXXI." Rewrite the poem in your own words. Then, write a few sentences predicting what the novel will be about based on the content of Millay's poem.

Chapter 1

2. The first chapter opens with the assertion that "to have a reason to get up in the morning, it is necessary to possess a guiding principle." Bumper stickers, it suggests, are one way people express the things that are important to them.

Respond to one of the following prompts:

- A. Write a paragraph describing the most memorable bumper sticker you have seen, and explain why it made an impression on you.
- B. Do you agree that bumper stickers reveal things that are important to the people who display them? Write a paragraph explaining your perspective. If possible, use an example to support your thoughts.
- C. Do some light internet research on bumper stickers. Choose two or three ideas that reflect your "guiding principle(s)" or things that are important to you. Record them, and write a few sentences for each about how it relates to something that is important to you.

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3. We can learn something about Conrad by what he says was on his walls—posters for athletic teams and bumper sticker-like sayings pasted onto cardboard. Think about your own bedroom; what could someone learn about you by looking at the contents of it?

Imagine that your bedroom is being made into an interactive museum. Guests will be able to touch anything in the room, and it will come to life and tell about you through its unique perspective and experience with you. Choose two to three objects in your room and write a script for each one to say when it comes to life. Include information such as where the object came from, how you acquired it, what it says about you, how important it is to you, how often you use it, why you use it, what it observes about you, phrases it hears you say most often, etc. Be creative!

4. Several words and phrases in this chapter are capitalized: Sense of Humor, Anxious Failure, Right Road, etc. Make a list of the capitalized phrases. Think about what could the significance of capitalizing them be.

Write a few sentences explaining why you think the author capitalized these words and what kind of effect this emphasis has on the chapter.

Chapter 2

5. In this chapter, the narrator shares Calvin's perspectives on and questions what it means to be a kid, a teenager, a father, and a mother. "Nobody's role is simple these days," he muses. Reread his reflections, and consider whether those roles have changed over time. Then choose one of them and write your own definition for it. Is the role simple, in your opinion, or complex?

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6. “Growing up is serious business. He, Cal, would not be young again, not for anything. And not without sponsors: a mother and father, good fortune, God.” Reflect on the process of growing up, and choose one of the following to write about:
- A. If you could go back and relive any year or period of your life, what would it be? Write a paragraph about that time and why you would choose it.
 - B. Do you think that Cal’s perspective is typical for a middle-aged adult? Take a poll of several middle-aged adults that you know, asking them whether they would like to be young again and why or why not. Then, write a paragraph comparing or contrasting your findings to Cal’s perspective. Explain why you think these adults feel as they do.
 - C. Cal lists four things that he would not want to be without if he had to go back and grow up again: a mother, a father, good fortune, and God. Write your own list. What are the three to five most important things you would want if you had to go back and grow up again? Write a few sentences to explain why you chose each one.

Chapter 3

7. “The air is crisp and cool, and he rubs his hands together, shivering in the thin denim jacket. He should go back inside; get a heavier one, but he doesn’t want to risk it. Not that she will care, or say anything. But the hurdle has been jumped once today. Enough.”

Write a paragraph explaining your understanding of the vague references in this opening paragraph of the chapter. Be sure to answer the following questions: What does Conrad not want to “risk”? Who is “she”? What is the “hurdle” he refers to? Why is once “enough”?

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Chapter 4

8. “Clichés,” Cal reflects, “...jump out at you from everywhere, but you never see your own.” Clichés are descriptions that once inspired a vivid picture through an unusual comparison but are no longer powerful because of overuse. Out-of-date clichés include “head over heels” to describe a person in love or “burning rubber” to describe a speeding car.

Make a list of all the clichés you find in this chapter. Look at more than just Ray’s speech; the author herself uses several clichés in other parts of the chapter. Then, rank each one from 1 (infrequent/never) to 5 (regularly/often) based on your personal use of them.

9. Cal doesn’t like to ride the train to work because, he says, it “gives him too much time to think” and “too much thinking can ruin you.” Do you understand what he means?

Write a paragraph explaining what you think Cal means. If possible, provide an example to illustrate your explanation.

Chapter 5

10. Words can have different meanings depending on the context in which they appear. Re-read the paragraph at the end of the chapter that begins, “The worst, the first session has been gotten through. And the guy is not bad; at least he is loose.” Then, write several sentences explaining what you think Conrad means by “loose” in this passage. Use details from the session and from this paragraph to support your explanation.

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11. In the next-to-last paragraph of this chapter, the author uses italics to indicate Conrad's conversation with himself.

Write a screenplay for the movie version of this scene. How will you show Conrad's discussion with himself? Consider the following:

- Will there be more than one actor?
- Will Conrad be speaking aloud or only in his mind?

Write your screenplay in script form with speaker(s) designated and specific line delivery and stage directions. Try to make the scene as vivid and realistic as possible. You may use the following beginning or write your own:

- [Walking down the street, hands in his pockets, staring off into space ahead of him]
- (Conrad thinking to himself); audience hears his voice but he is **not physically speaking**: So, how do you stay open, when nobody mentions anything, when everybody is careful *not* to mention it?...

Chapter 6

12. Calvin inwardly expresses disgust at the superficiality of his secretary Cherry. Even though she is young and immature, she seems to know who she is and has the confidence to act accordingly. He also sees his former mentor, Arnold Bacon, as an example of a person who knew exactly who he was. Calvin feels the weight of his lack of self-knowledge. He knows *what* he is (a tax attorney) and *how* to be what he is, which he knows by rote, but he doesn't know *who* he is; he doesn't have a grasp of his true, inner self. The question plagues him, and he finds it too complicated to answer.

Write a poem describing yourself and how you perceive yourself. Do you feel that you know your true self, or are you uncertain? Convey how your perception of yourself influences your actions. Your poem must be at least ten lines long. It does not need to rhyme, but it certainly may.