

## Great Books 2: *Discussion Guide*

### Overview

Combine large helpings of imagination, innovation, and insight, and add in a good measure of intriguing characters and marvelous language. Mix in the ability to endure and the potential for huge impact. These are some of the ingredients for a great book. Introduce students to great books including Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*, and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* as you help them to discover what distinguishes great books and inspire their interest to read great books themselves.

### Classroom Activities

1. Show the video segment "Introduction: 'The Red Badge of Courage' and the Realities of War" from *Great Books: The Red Badge of Courage* program.

- **Quiz:** Invite students to take the following true/false quiz after seeing the video:

- T F Stephen Crane was a soldier in the Civil War.
- T F Crane was a newspaper journalist in the 1800s.
- T F *The Red Badge of Courage* was first published in newspapers.
- T F The novel was very similar to other war novels of the time.
- T F Crane presented the war from the viewpoint of a leader.

(Answers: F, T, T, F, F)

- **Discussion:** Ask students: What sets *The Red Badge of Courage* apart from earlier books about war? Why does the video refer to the book as a "turning point"? Although the book was published in 1895, why is it considered "modern"? Point out that great books usually break new ground in some way, and review how *The Red Badge of Courage* did that.

- **Poetry:** Read war poems by Stephen Crane, including the following stanza from "War Is Kind" (1899). Ask students if Crane is being serious or sarcastic (ironic) when he says "war is kind."

Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind,  
Because your lover threw wild hands toward the sky  
And the affrighted steed ran on alone,  
Do not weep.  
War is kind.

- **Comparison:** Introduce two other great antiwar books built on the tradition of *The Red Badge of Courage*:
    - *All Quiet on the Western Front*, written in 1928 by Erich Maria Remarque, which is told from the point of view of Paul, a young German soldier during World War I.
    - *Catch-22*, written in 1955 by Joseph Heller, which presents a satiric view of World War II through the eyes of a soldier named Yossarian.
 Direct students to compare and contrast these three books by using a Venn diagram. You may wish to show the video of one of these modern great books in class.
  
  - **Current Events:** Have students bring to class current newspaper or magazine articles about war. See if the articles portray the viewpoint of the average soldier. Encourage students to compare and contrast these articles with Crane’s novel.
2. Show the video segment “‘Call Me Ishmael’: The Voyage Begins” from *Great Books: Moby Dick* (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)
- **Pre-Video Activity:** Ask students what they know about *Moby Dick*, and show them a photograph of a whaling ship, noting that *Moby Dick* may have been influenced by the sinking of the whale ship *Essex*. Introduce the setting of the whaling ship as a “microcosm” for the larger world. Note that *Moby Dick* is known for being highly symbolic at the same time as it is very informative about whaling.
  
  - **Character:** Based on the video clip, ask students to contrast the three characters of Ishmael, Ahab, and Starbuck. (They may recognize that Ishmael is a restless wanderer, Ahab is a bitter and driven zealot, and Starbuck is a practical and dedicated worker.) Point out that great books portray complex, vivid, and memorable characters that readers find compelling. Ask students to find out who these famous characters from great books are and what they are like:
    - Tom Joad
    - Juliet
    - Odysseus
    - Elizabeth Bennet
  
  - **Biographical Research:** Ask students to look up biographical information about Herman Melville’s life to answer these questions:
    - What was Melville’s early life like, and how did it influence his work?
    - What was the United States like during the era when Melville lived?
    - What is most admired about Melville’s writing?
  
  - **Discussion:** Challenge students to confront some of the great themes that Melville addresses in *Moby Dick*, such as good vs. evil. Discuss these questions: Can a positive goal be taken too far? Does something good taken to the extreme become bad? What happens when someone becomes possessed by a single goal? Can evil be conquered? What is the most threatening force facing the United States today?

- **Writing:** Ask students to think of a person who is single-minded about something and write a one-paragraph description of that person. Direct students to convey the person’s intensity in their descriptions.
3. Show the video segment “Thoreau’s Life on Walden Pond” from *Great Books: Walden*. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)
- **Self-Inventory:** Introduce students to the themes of *Walden* by having them take a self-inventory, indicating A for agree or D for disagree:
    - A D A simple life is best.
    - A D I think solitude is important.
    - A D There are things I’d like to reform in society.
    - A D Nature is a source of inspiration for me.
    - A D I admire people who stand up for what they believe in.
  - **Glossary:** Have students define these terms from the video and make flashcards: civilization, cycle, reform, simplicity, solitude, transform, tonic.
  - **Quotations:** Help students to explain the following quotations from *Walden* and explain how they fit with what they know about Thoreau’s philosophy, such as his reverence for nature and desire for a simple life. Also, guide students to appreciate his vivid and poetic use of language. (You may wish to assign a group of students to explain each quote.)
    - “We need the tonic of wildness.”
    - “Go confidently in the direction of your dreams.”
    - “Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth.”
    - “That man is richest whose pleasures are the cheapest.”
    - “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.”
    - “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life.”
    - “Live each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influences of each.”
    - “Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is in prison.”
    - “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”
  - **Discussion:** Discuss with students the impact that Thoreau’s work has had. Ask: Why do you think the conservation movement, national parks, and environmentalism might be traced back to Thoreau? How would those who agree with Thoreau live today?
  - **Descriptive Writing:** Invite students to walk in Thoreau’s shoes by experiencing the solitude of nature and then writing about it. Ask students to write descriptive paragraphs about a favorite spot in the outdoors. Encourage them to drink in its details with all their senses—sight, hearing, smell, touch, and feel—and to convey these details in a vivid description.

4. Show the video segment “Huck and Jim’s Journey: A Friendship Blooms” from *Great Books: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)
  - **Theme:** Emphasize that great books treat important themes, and some of the important themes that Twain addresses in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are freedom, justice, and friendship. Ask: What moral dilemma confronts Huck Finn? Why do you think Twain presents the conflict between right and wrong through the eyes of a young boy?
  - **Historical Research:** Remind students that *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is set in the United States during the mid-1800s. Invite students to research and report on slavery and the abolitionist movement in the mid-nineteenth century.
  - **Humor:** Discuss the humor in the video segment about *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and point out that Mark Twain is famous for his ironic wit. Ask students to identify the humor in these quotations attributed to Mark Twain:
    - “Always do right; this will gratify some people and astonish the rest.”
    - “Few things are harder to put up with than a good example.”
    - “Be careful about reading health books. You may die of a misprint.”
    - “Get your facts first, and then you can distort them as much as you please.”
    - “I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.”
    - “Good breeding consists in concealing how much we think of ourselves and how little we think of the other person.”
    - “I haven’t a particle of confidence in a man who has no redeeming petty vices.”
  - **Book Jacket:** Encourage students to create a book cover for one of the great books they have studied in this unit.
  - **Discussion:** Begin with this quotation from Thoreau: “How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book.” Ask students, “What makes a book great?” Encourage them to debate and summarize ideas about what makes a “great book.” (Make sure that they recognize that vivid characters, important themes, innovative approach, and enduring impact are part of the equation.)

## Academic Standards

This discussion guide addresses the following national standards:

### National Council for the Social Studies

<http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands/>

- Culture
- Time, Continuity and Change
- People, Places and Environment



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- Individual Development and Identity

### **Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)**

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>

#### Language Arts

- Writing: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process; gathers and uses information for research purposes
- Reading: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts
- Listening and Speaking: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes
- Viewing: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media

#### History

- Historical Understanding: Understands and knows how to analyze chronological relationships and patterns

#### Life Skills

- Thinking and Reasoning: Effectively uses mental processes that are based on identifying similarities and differences