

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for For Whom the Bell Tolls by Ernest Hemingway

Book Information

Ernest Hemingway, For Whom the Bell Tolls

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Book Level: 5.8

Interest Level: UG

This timeless epic of the Spanish Civil War portrays every facet of human emotions.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Countries/Regions, Spain; Emotions, Courage; Emotions, Love; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Wars, Misc./Other

Main Characters

Agustin, Primitivo, Eladio, Andres guerillas who belong to Pablo's band

Anselmo an old peasant who knows the mountains and helps Robert Jordan but dies when the bridge blows up

Karkov a Russian communist and journalist who is a friend of Robert Jordan

Maria a young woman who has been taken in by a group of partizans fighting the fascists, and who falls in love with Robert Jordan

Pablo the leader of a band of guerillas who hide out in a cave in the mountains, and who is opposed to blowing up the bridge and almost causes the mission to fail

Pilar, mujer of Pablo wife of Pablo, who changes her allegiance to support Robert Jordan's mission for the good of Spain

Rafael a gypsy who assists Pablo's band of guerillas

Robert Jordan an American dynamite expert who fights against the fascists in Spain's civil war and whose mission is to blow up a strategic mountain bridge

Vocabulary

absinthe a somewhat bitter alcoholic drink made from brandy flavored with wormwood, anise, or other herbs

anarchists persons who want to overthrow established governments and have a world without rules and laws

Bohemianism a carefree unconventional way of living

fascist a person supporting a government in which property is privately owned, but all industry and labor are regulated by a strong national government

partizans civilians who fight as guerillas

Synopsis

Robert Jordan is an American mercenary fighting against fascist forces during the Spanish Civil War. He is an expert "dynamiter" whose mission is to blow up a bridge in the mountains only after verifying the commencement of an attack.

Jordan joins with a band of partisan guerillas at their camp in the mountains near the targeted bridge. There he meets and falls in love with Maria, a young woman who was taken in by the guerillas after a terrible assault. She also falls in love, and her love for Jordan helps her to recover.

Jordan is welcomed by everyone in the guerilla band except Pablo, their leader. He sees Jordan's mission as a threat to his band and votes against it. Pilar, his wife, takes a stand against Pablo, and the rest of the band members follow her. Pablo becomes disagreeable, and Jordan suspects he will eventually cause trouble.

The author chronicles the development of the relationships formed between the characters as they all fight for a common cause. The themes of love and trust, betrayal and self-sacrifice are interwoven with the events of a war. The reader is taken inside each character as they personally experience conflict and is made witness to how barbaric war can be.

In the end, Robert Jordan, who realizes he has

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already made the ultimate sacrifice, chooses not to end his life himself as his father had done, in order to delay the enemies' pursuit of his beloved Maria. While Jordan's tragic fate is sealed, the reader is left with the notion that love, courage, and honor have prevailed.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Pablo initially blamed Robert Jordan for the problems his band of guerillas faced after Jordan's arrival at his camp. Why did Pablo place blame on Jordan, and do you agree with Pablo?

Pablo's reaction probably falls under the adage of wanting to kill the messenger because of the message he brings. Pablo didn't like being told what to do, and he viewed the bombing of the bridge as very dangerous. He believed foreigners, like Jordan, had only their own interests, not Spain's, in mind.

Literary Analysis

Ernest Hemingway's main protagonists were men and women of great courage and strong convictions. Describe how Robert Jordan fits this profile.

Jordan left the freedoms of American citizenship to fight for a nation of people being overrun by an ideology that he opposed. He repeatedly risked his own life as a "dynamiter" to aid the partizans' cause against the fascists. In the end, he made the ultimate sacrifice.

Inferential Comprehension

Choose three characters and describe how each reacted in a typical fashion when faced with the horrors of war.

Maria: while she tended the horses during the attack, she prayed that Roberto would survive the bombing; Anselmo: he felt a great sense of guilt for killing the guard on the bridge; Jordan: he felt the stress of the responsibility placed upon him as he wired the explosives to the bridge.

Constructing Meaning

Why do you think the author ended the story as he did?

Having the story end with Robert Jordan barely alive reinforces his parting words to Maria that he will always be alive with her.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors

Blacklisting was mentioned briefly by the main character of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. The actual practice of blacklisting in America during the days of Sen. Joseph McCarthy was a particularly dark period in the country's history. Have students research blacklisting in this era and give a report in which they explain what it was, who it affected, and whether or not it was justified.

Understanding the Author's Craft

Ernest Hemingway was able to draw upon his own numerous and varied life experiences for the books he wrote. He spent a lot of time in wartime settings, and the degree to which he accurately portrays wartime events make his stories seem very real. To promote a better understanding of Hemingway's purpose and point of view, have students complete a project in which they interview someone who has firsthand knowledge of war, either as an observer or participant, and compare the latter account with Hemingway's in a short paper; or research the Spanish civil war, the backdrop for this novel, and report on their findings; or investigate Hemingway's own life to understand his perspective and prepare a written

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report on his experiences.

Describing Actions or Events The most suspenseful part of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was probably the account of the bridge bombing. Have students review this portion of the story. Then ask them to write it as a script for broadcast on a national television news program. Finally, have students volunteer to "broadcast" their stories to the rest of the class.

Responding to Literature The title of this novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, comes from the writings of the poet, John Donne. The passage says in part: "No man is an island, entire of itself...; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee." Have students discuss the significance of this title. The discussion should include the idea that whatever anyone does affects all others directly or indirectly; all actions are related. In this story, for example, Pablo's trail left in the snow caused an unexpected cavalry attack. Also, Commissar Marty's suspicion of Communists caused him to delay the communique to general Golz that warned of the enemy's preparedness. The attack proceeded, and lives were lost as a result. Help guide students to understand the message that we are not to waste time wondering who fate's victim is, the one the bell tolls for, because it actually tolls for all of us.