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SYNOPSIS

Chap. I: During a harsh winter, an unnamed boy around age 10, lives in the South with two siblings. He is the child of a black family of sharecroppers. His home is too far for the walk to school in October, when classes begin. The father and their coon dog Sounder hunt for possums and raccoons to supplement limited food stocks until wind and cold halt their hunting trips. One night, the boy wonders why his father leaves the cabin alone and unaccompanied by the dog. The boy awakens the next morning to the aroma of frying sausages and the bubble of ham cooking in a pot. It seems like Christmas, but he notices that his mother hums rather than sings, a sure sign that she is worried.

Chap. II: Three days later, the sheriff and two deputies arrest the father at the cabin and charge him with stealing sausage and ham from a white landowner's smokehouse. The white lawmen chain the father and start to drive away in a wagon. Sounder, whom the boy tries to hold, breaks free and chases them. A deputy shoots the dog with a shotgun. Sounder lies as still as death, then yelps plaintively and drags himself under the cabin. The mother believes that Sounder wants to die alone, but the boy refuses to give up hope that the dog survived.

Chap. III: The next day, the mother puts leftover sausage and ham in a meal sack. She wraps walnut kernels in paper and leaves for town to sell her walnuts. In her absence, the boy searches under the cabin for Sounder and retrieves the dog's severed ear. He fears that townspeople will mistreat his mother. He weeps as he walks the fields, but finds no dog.

Chap. IV: When the mother returns, she comments that Sounder may have found oak-leaf acid in the woods to cure his wounds. Weeks pass, but Sounder does not return. On Christmas morning, she sends the boy to town with a cake she has baked as a gift. The white jailer smashes the cake to search for a file or hacksaw blade. The atmosphere is intimidating, but the father instructs the boy to be cheerful and not to grieve his mother. The visiting preacher will bring any news.

Chap. V: After a long walk home in the dark, the boy searches for his dog and later dreams of a man who asks if the boy wants to learn. The next morning, Sounder returns home. The once mighty dog is reduced to a skeleton. Ghastly wounds leave him badly crippled and off-balance. He is no longer capable of hunting. Daily, he limps out to the road, lies in the dirt, and awaits his master's return. While working in houses in town, the mother asks an employer to read the court news. She learns that her husband has been sentenced to hard labor.

Chap. VI: No one knows the length of the sentence nor where the father is serving it. Seasons pass; the boy works the crops like a man. In time, he yearns to search for his

father. On a series of journeys, he seeks work camps, returning home to help his family cut wood, gather walnuts, and harvest the fields. Although he fails to locate his father, the journeys broaden the boy's world. He learns to read from discarded newspapers and magazines and entertains himself with stories of Joseph and King David.

Chap. VII: The boy retrieves a book from a trash barrel. At a school, he meets a black man who recognizes the book as a copy of Montaigne's *Essays*. The elderly man is a teacher who invites the boy to his home and tells him a story. That night, the boy tells about his father and Sounder.

Chap. VIII: With the mother's permission, for the next six years, the boy lives part-time with the teacher and returns home periodically to work. The man helps the boy interpret experience and improve his reading. During August dog days, the boy hears Sounder's bay for the first time since the shooting. In the distance, a tiny figure approaches. The boy realizes that Sounder is welcoming his father home.

Handicapped by a dynamite blast in the prison quarry, the father has lost the will to live, but has hung on to see his family once more. In October, he goes to the pine woods with Sounder and dies peacefully under a tree. Sounder dies in early December. Saddened, the boy treasures the wisdom he has gained from experience and the memory of his father and dog.

TIME LINE

previous year	The father wins a pig in a shooting match. The meat is the first pork the boy has tasted.
previous fall	The boy is unable to walk to school in the cold.
winter	The family depends on Sounder during hunts in the woods. Because wind disperses animal sounds, the dog can't hunt and has little to eat.
after bedtime	The mother cracks walnuts and tells the oldest child Bible stories. He dreams of a flood.
next morning	The family enjoys a treat—sausage and ham.
toward evening	The mother patches clothes.
three days later	The sheriff handcuffs the father for stealing meat. A deputy shoots Sounder as the wagon carries the prisoner to jail.
bedtime	The boy searches for Sounder and fills a plate for him.
next morning	The mother takes leftover meat to town and sells her walnuts at the store.
late afternoon	She returns with vanilla and a box to hold a cake.
Dec. 24	She ices two cakes.
Dec. 25	The boy carries the cake to the jail and vis-

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	its his father.
Dec. 26 later	Sounder returns. The mother learns that her husband has been sentenced to hard labor. The boy searches prison camps for his father. At a school, he meets the teacher, who invites him to his home.
that night	The boy tells about his father and Sounder.
next six years	The boy boards with the teacher and goes to school. His father is injured in a dynamite blast.
August	Sounder barks a welcome as the crippled master returns.
mid-September	The boy returns to school.
October	The father dies.
December	Sounder dies.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

A Newbery-winning writer, William Howard Armstrong has loved stories from childhood. The oral quality of one favorite tale about a coon dog remained with him until it formed the kernel for *Sounder*, his seventh publication. Armstrong, the son of farmer Howard Gratton and Ida Morris Armstrong, was born in Lexington, Virginia, on Sept. 14, 1914. After completing high school at Augusta Military Academy in 1932, he attended Hampden-Sydney College and graduated *cum laude* with membership in Phi Beta Kappa.

Williams pursued graduate work at the University of Virginia and taught at Virginia Episcopal School. Two years after marrying Martha Stone Street, he took the post of history master at Kent School in Kent, Connecticut, which he held for 21 years. A builder and mason, Armstrong constructed Kimadee Hill, his stone-and-wood home. In addition to freelance writing, he raises Corriedale sheep on his farm.

CRITIC'S CORNER

Six years before achieving fame with his novel, Williams received the National School Bell Award of National Association of School Administrators for distinguished service to education. Dedicated to his children, Christopher "Kip," David, and Mary, Armstrong's rich story about humble sharecroppers and hard times exposed an old claim—that only black writers can capture the truth about prejudice. The assertion proved false in the case of *Sounder*, which immediately found a place among classic young adult literature. His straightforward narrative earned him the Lewis Carroll Book Shelf, Mark Twain, and Nene awards as well as the Jewish-Christian Brotherhood award, the Sue Hedley award, and an honorary degree from Hampden-Sydney College.

A 1972 film, produced by 20th Century-Fox, set *Sounder* in Depression-era Louisiana. It cast Kevin Hooks, Cicely Tyson, and Paul Winfield in family roles. The screen version became an immediate hit and long-lived family feature. Awards include a best film and best actress from the National Board of Review, Best Actress from the National Society of Film Critics, and Oscar nominations for best picture and for Winfield and Tyson, as well as for screen adapter Lonnie Elder III.

GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To enumerate novel conventions
2. To analyze purpose and themes
3. To understand the black experience in nineteenth-centu-

ry America

4. To realize that courage and dignity take a variety of forms
5. To characterize brutality
6. To compare human and animal loyalty
7. To sympathize with sufferers
8. To accentuate the importance of education to the poor
9. To account for the kernel of the story
10. To understand the workings of framework narrative

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To identify shifts in family power structure when a father is jailed
2. To note stylistic details that elucidate the theft of meat
3. To analyze the symbolism of the torn ear
4. To establish the Christmas mood in the cabin and in town
5. To evaluate the tedious hand labor of harvesting walnuts
6. To characterize a need for news of the father's sentence
7. To compare the returns of son, father, and dog
8. To epitomize the gentle passing of the father
9. To express the boy's assistance to his mother
10. To account for the ringing cry of Sounder's voice in the boy's memories

LITERARY TERMS AND APPLICATIONS

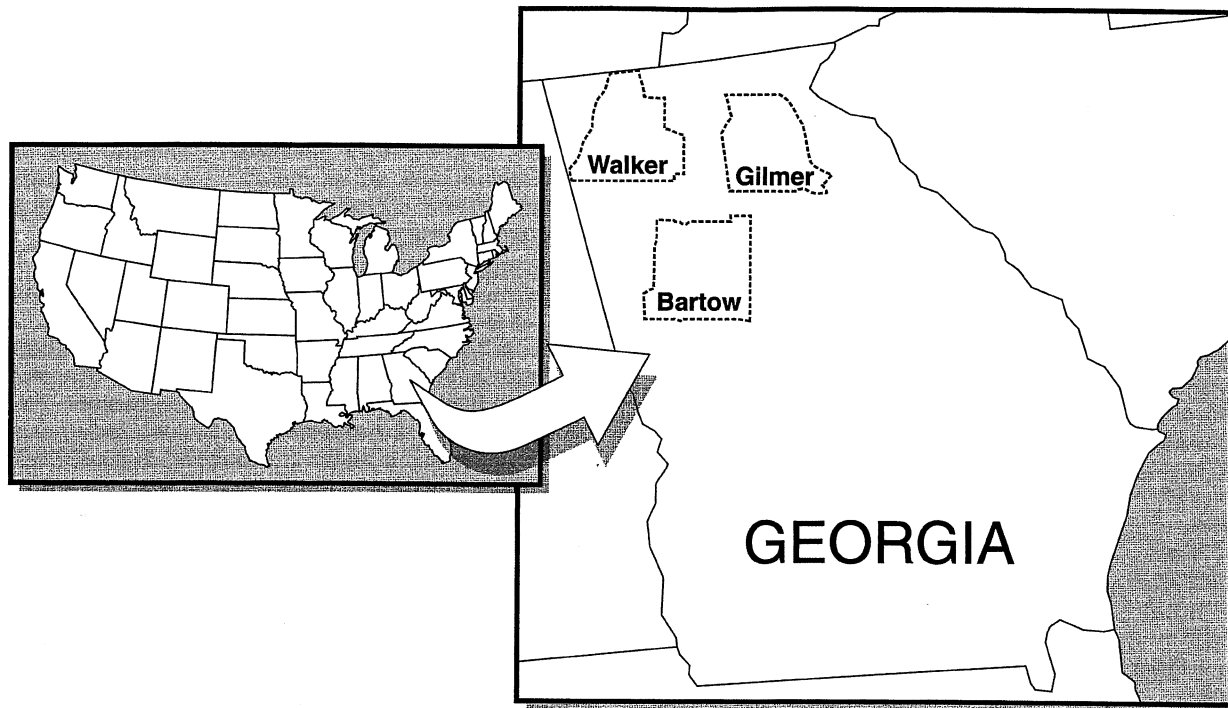
For a better understanding of William H. Armstrong's novel, present the following terms and applications:

climax the height of an action, a crisis or turning point from which all behaviors or attitudes are permanently altered and nothing can ever be what it once was. Once the boy learns to read and accepts the teacher's offer of continued schooling, he begins rescuing himself from the hopeless trap of sharecropping, illiteracy, and Southern injustice. The beginnings of understanding and pride carry over at home, where the boy begins teaching his siblings. The father, who is unable to return to an agricultural lifestyle, drifts into secondary importance as his son moves toward a position of responsibility.

fantasy a dimension of imaginative literature that blends the real world with incredible characters, for instance, the visions that the boy has of his father grabbing the jailer about the throat and choking him. In his mind, he sees "the red-faced man lying on the jail floor with blood oozing out of the corners of his mouth." The impetus for fantasized murder is home-centered—the destruction of the cake discounts of the mother's gift. An escape through fantasy is a normal mental release for the boy, who has no way to fight back. To substantiate the terror of strangulation, after being overcome at the jail by the callous, sneering oppressor, the boy continues to fantasize on his way home. In the privacy of his thoughts, he relives a real event in which a veterinarian throttles a difficult bull.

motif a pattern or predictable arrangement of elements to express an abstract theme in a story, as found in the bay of the great dog. The cry occurs at important moments in the text. When the father and boy go hunting, Sounder's call indicates a successful stalking and prefigures meat on the table for a hungry family. When the sheriff and his deputies arrive and manhandle the father, Sounder claws at the door and lifts his voice in protest. When the father returns from prison,

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once more, the maimed dog bays in celebration and bounds away on three good legs to welcome his master. As an impetus to memory, throughout adulthood, the resonant call returns the central character to childhood in happier times when father, dog, and boy formed a competent threesome.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SETTING

The milieu of *Sounder* recalls the misery of sharecropping that still lurks on Southern backroads. Set in the northwestern Georgia counties of Bartow, Walker, and Gilmer, the story opens in cold weather, when the cabin's meager protection from the elements requires constant attendance at the woodlot and trips outside to fetch chunk-sticks. Cottonwood, a spindly, but readily available tree, supplies firewood that burns too fast and too hot. The parents balance their responsibilities to house and family by supervising the children near the reddening stove and by parceling out food, firewood, and lamp oil. Because of the constant interaction of parent and child, the boy learns to gauge his mother's moods and to rejoice in the ebullient father who leads him into the wild for winter hunts.

Contrast brings to the surface the lives of townspeople. As the boy passes farther from back country roads into the center of town, he observes the differences between local Christmas celebration and the homely preparations he has witnessed at home. The painstaking removal of walnuts from their husks and the icing of a three-layer and one-layer cakes seem grossly devalued by the jailer, who gouges the cake apart in mock search for tools. Nearing his father's cell, the boy hears the same mournful spirituals that his mother hums when she is worried. The father, realizing that jail is no place for a boy, sends the child home with careful instructions to keep up his mother's spirits and never to return to "the iron door and the gray cement walls of the jail."

When the boy's milieu expands from familiar home

scenes, he learns to fend for himself at prison camps and on lonely travels about neighboring counties. His reception at the school is fortuitous, for his bloodied hand needs tending and questions need answers. In a home more opulent than any cabin he has ever seen, he recognizes tenderness in a gentle old teacher who talks to spindly plants and treasures books and stories.

In the final separation of father from son, the ailing man dissolves the old threesome and goes alone with Sounder to spare the weary boy a walk in the woods. Armstrong caresses the familiar trudge as "the halting, hesitant swing of the lantern marked the slow path from fields to pine woods toward the lowlands." At the old log ramp, where the setting sun shoots splinters of light through boughs, the boy finds his father alongside the lantern. Its light symbolizes an unquenchable spirit that lives on in the boy.

True to his father, the boy witnesses the man's burial "in the unfenced lot behind the meetin' house." Amid sumac and briars, the family hears the comforting verse of Psalm 23 linking the father to David, the shepherd poet who came of age out of doors. Similarly, Sounder is buried before Christmas between home and the wild—at the foot of "the big jack oak tree in the stalk land by the fencerow." In his memories, the boy grows to manhood still caressing the sight of pine trees and a bright lantern as the coon dog's bay echoes through the night.

CROSS-CURRICULAR SOURCES

For more information about sharecropping, coon dogs, chain gangs, and other subjects and issues deriving from the novel, consult these sources:

Characters in Crisis, Center for Humanities

Gun Dog Training, Bill Tarrant

Mothers of the South: Portraiture of the White Tenant Farm Woman, Margaret Jarman Hagood

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Now Let Us Praise Famous Men, James Agee
You Have Seen the Faces, Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White

Also, consult these websites:

"Labor of Doing Time," <http://www.cgv.org/justice/prisons/crisis/labor-of-doing-time>.

"Raccoon Hunting," <http://www.geocities.com/RainForest/vines/4892huntcons.html>.

"The Reconstruction," <http://gps.lhric.org/middle/ems/rcpeters.html>.

THEMES AND MOTIFS

A study of the central issues and situations in William H. Armstrong's *Sounder* should include these aspects:

Themes

- oppression
- poverty
- companionship
- dilemma
- conflict
- loss
- loyalty
- reunion
- ambition
- death
- memories

Motifs

- absence of familiar comforts
- relying on a woman of strong faith and character
- coping with overwhelming forces
- setting out on an ill-fated journey
- choosing wisely a future aim
- saying farewell to a deceased friend

MEANING STUDY

Below are words, phrases, or sentences that have a particular meaning in the novel. Explain each. Chapter and page numbers are provided so that you can reread the passage from which the item is taken.

1. The white man who owned the vast endless fields had scattered the cabins of his Negro sharecroppers far apart, like flyspecks on a whitewashed ceiling. (Chap. I, p. 2)
(Sharecroppers are tenant farmers who pay for rent, seed, and equipment by giving part of their harvest to the landowner. The comparison to flies suggests how little the laboring class is valued. In the South, the system, once limited to poor whites, included newly freed slaves after the end of the Civil War in 1865. The ramifications of poor education, no employment opportunities, limited cash money, and inadequate housing, transportation, and health care kept sharecroppers in virtual slavery far into the twentieth century. The system was particularly cruel during the Depression.)
2. Some creatures are like people. (Chap. II, p. 29)
(The mother regards Sounder more as a person than as a beast. She thinks that Sounder prefers to die alone rather than let anyone see him suffer. As the boy follows a trail of blood, he shivers in anticipation of finding a corpse. Although he has seen dead lizards and possums and raccoons, he has never seen a "human animal" like Sounder dead. When the dog returns, out of loyalty to a
3. His father always spoke aloud to the wind and sky. (Chap. III, p. 37)
(The sharecropping family lives close to nature. Their survival depends upon accurate reading and interpretation of weather signs. Inevitably, they personify natural elements—sun, wind, and sky. Like primitive people from the dawn of time, they live in noble simplicity and in harmony with nature.)
4. But you must learn to lose, child. (Chap. IV, p. 52)
(Growing up in the South a century ago, the mother advises her son to accept one of life's verities: Black people always lose. They are "born to lose." Her submissiveness is not cowardice but an acknowledgement of reality. She believes that life is more bearable if blacks accept their status as members of a hopelessly impoverished race held in servitude. According to current beliefs in equal justice and opportunity, the concept seems excessively meek, but current civil rights were unheard of in the time and place where the story occurs.)
5. The boy had heard once that some people had so many books they only read each book once. (Chap. IV, p. 56)
(The boy's overwhelming reverence for printed text characterizes a point in Southern black history when opportunities were severely limited to the underclass. More than anything, he dreams of learning to read and yearns to own one book. Discarded newsprint provides him the only means to literacy. Although he has learned that some people are so privileged that they needn't depend on having only one book, he can't believe such wealth. His poverty is so intense that he finds it inconceivable to discount a treasured book.)
6. And in Bible-story journeys, ain't no journey hopeless. Everybody finds what they suppose to find. (Chap. VI, p. 77)
(The illiterate mother has passed on Bible stories told by a black preacher. Many, like those of Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph, detail lengthy journeys. The boy observes that the Lord protected those journeymen and provided an appropriate end to their travels. He concludes that a search for his father should also succeed. However, readings from news stories trouble him because they don't always end suitably. His faith remains steadfast, even though contemporary reality seems to repudiate the ideal of divine justice. The boy's determination constitutes a kind of victory over circumstance.)
7. I have often heard it said that cowardice is the mother of cruelty, and I have found by experience that malicious and inhuman animosity and fierceness are usually accompanied by weakness. (Chap. VII p. 90)
(According to "Of Cruelty," an essay from the wonderful book retrieved from a trash barrel, only cowards and weaklings commit harmful acts. The author, Michel Montaigne, who tired of soldiering, liked to walk country roads and turned his musings into essays, the forerunner of the modern essay. The boy learns from the essayist's commentary that white oppression is the outgrowth of fear. White supremacy demands that the black race be subservient. To grant equal dignity would undermine the dominance of white over black.)

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8. "Dog days is a terrible time," the woman said. "It's when the heat is so bad the dogs go mad." (Chap. VIII, p. 103) *(The boy's mother believes that dog days, which extend over the sultry part of summer from July 3 to August 11, can cause rabies or convulsions in dogs. The boy learns from his teacher that the term "dog days" actually derives from the period between the annual rise and set of Sirius, the dog star. The incident illustrates how the boy begins to comprehend truth from education rather than tradition.)*
9. When life is so tiresome, there ain't no peace like the greatest peace—the peace of the Lord's hand holding you. (Chap. VIII, p. 113)
(After years of laboring on a chain gang, the father comes home broken in body and spirit. He looks forward to death, which will end his idleness from work and hunting. His only remaining pleasures are enjoying his family and walking in the deep pine woods with Sounder. On one of his trips to the woods, he dies. The mother accepts his passing as she accepts other trials—with quiet resignation. She understands that life has become too great a burden for her crippled husband, who finds release in death. Although she has known little except oppression and suffering, she, like the downtrodden black slaves before her, retains a simple faith in God's goodness.)
10. Only the unwise think that what has changed is dead. (Chap. VIII, p. 114)
(Montaigne's philosophy comforts the boy. The teacher interprets the citation in terms of plant life: "If a flower blooms once, it goes on blooming forever. It blooms on for whoever has seen it blooming." As Armstrong explains in the preface, the source of his fiction is a black teacher. The author elaborates: "That world of long ago has almost totally changed. The church balcony is gone. The table is gone from the kitchen. But the story remains." Thus, like the resilient blossom, the novel substantiates the truth and wisdom of Montaigne's philosophy. Although a century has passed since the black man's childhood, as long as people learn from Sounder, the story will live.)

COMPREHENSION STUDY

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages from the novel.

Questions 1-5 Literal Level

1. Where does Sounder get his name?
(Sounder, the only character in the novel with a name, acquires his identity from the sound of his bay and bark. In Armstrong's words, the priceless sound roared out of chest and jaws "as though it had bounced off the walls of a cave. It mellowed into half-echo before it touched the air." Sounder becomes one with the environment by the spread of his cry. Nature, too, influences his voice: "The mists of the flatlands strained whatever coarseness was left over from his bulldog heritage, and only flutelike redbone mellowness came to the listener. But it was louder and clearer than any purebred redbone." The remark diminishes the dog's tenacity and refines it into a pure hound cry, just as the boy's search refines his outlook on
- people and enables him to accept each experience as an integral part of manhood.*
- The dynamics of the dog's voice take on a mathematical precision: "The trail barks seemed to be spaced with the precision of a juggler. Each bark bounced from slope to slope in the foothills like a rubber ball." The unusual timbre also links to art. In the author's memory, the sound "filled up the night and made music as though the branches of all the trees were being pulled across silver strings." In his memories of a trying boyhood, the speaker is wafled back to his hunting days by the cry of the great redbone hound.)*
2. What is the father's crime?
(Because his family is hungry and the windy, cold weather won't allow him to hunt, the father enters a white man's smokehouse to steal a ham and sausages. The boldness takes on special meaning in view of the fact that the family had only once in the boy's memory eaten pork. In the act, the father tears his ticking overalls on the door hook. The sheriff and deputies trail him, locate the remains of a ham dinner, and note the tear in his clothes. The men deduce that there is no doubt of guilt. The sheriff orders him chained and removed by wagon to the jail. For stealing food for his family, the father must serve an undisclosed amount of time at hard labor on a chain gang. Several years pass before he returns home. His early release derives from severe crippling during an explosion. No longer of use as prison labor, he is allowed to drag himself home.)
3. Why does the deputy shoot Sounder?
(When the sheriff and his men enter the cabin, they order the boy outside to restrain Sounder. If the dog threatens them, they intend to shoot him. The deputies chain the prisoner to the wagon. As the vehicle starts toward town, the dog breaks away from the boy's hold. With a great lunge, Sounder races after his master. The deputy who has a free hand shoots as the dog jumps at the side of the wagon. When Sounder falls, the sheriff directs his horse around the inert body. When the boy goes out to retrieve the dog, he finds a hopeful sign—the body is gone. The mother believes that Sounder has crawled off to die, but the boy refuses to give up hope that Sounder has survived and will return. On December 26, Sounder returns on three legs. He is skeletal with head and shoulders hairless and tanned reddish brown. One foot dangles uselessly. The cropped ear is reduced to a scarred stub; one eye is gone. Above the socket, a bone splinter protrudes from the wound. Sounder never recovers. His shoulder wound refuses to heal; thus, the dog is unable to put full weight on both sides. Now one-eyed and unable to look straight ahead, he gives up hunting and remains in the road near the cabin where he had tried to rescue his master. His handicap sidelines him until the father limps home.)
4. Where does the boy hope to acquire reading material?
(The boy longs to go to school and learn to read. He understands intuitively that, without education, he will never escape the confines of sharecropping and poverty. Looking ahead to the next October, he hopes to be strong enough to make the daily journey to school. He wishes that his mother's white employers would give her

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old books, holy objects to a person who has no reading material.

As second best, the boy combs trash for discarded magazines and newspapers. The articles differ markedly from the Bible stories that he learned from his mother's storytelling. Undeterred, he continues to value all contact with literacy. When he locates a collection of Montaigne's essays, he carries the anthology like a valued possession and allows the teacher to introduce him to "Of Cruelty," an essay he intends to read for himself.)

5. What happens to Sounder's voice?

(After the deputy's shotgun blast badly cripples Sounder, he no longer barks. The boy ponders the absence of a voice, a marked change from the days when father, son, and dog hunted the foothills. When his injuries heal, Sounder has no obvious throat wound. He eats well, but refuses his old enthusiastic bark at the call, "Sounder, good Sounder.")

After years of silence, Sounder's magnificent voice returns. The time is significant—the dog days of late summer. No longer impeded by grief for his master, "the voice of the great coon hound broke the sultry August deadness." Dashing along the dirt road, he hurries to greet the father. In the dog's wake, three-pointed dust clouds rise from his rapid maneuvering of a maimed body. The renewed bark is like a victory cry: "The mighty voice rolled out upon the valley, each flutelike bark echoing from slope to slope." A young dog once more in anticipation of reunion, he intones the mellow sounds to welcome his master home.)

Questions 6-8 Interpretive Level

6. How does the boy react to encounters with white people?

(Cruelty is the standard result of most interactions with white people. When the deputies remove their prisoner from the cabin, a boot shoves the boy, who had sprawled forward when Sounder leaped away and chased the wagon. In town, the red-faced jail guard swears, squashes the Christmas cake into crumbs, and forces the boy to clean up the mess. Much later, a guard takes advantage of the boy's rapt study of prison activity to smash his fingers with a piece of iron. The boy reacts with helpless rage.

In one of his fantasies, the boy sees his father avenging him by holding the "scarecrow of a man" upwards in one hand by the neck, just the way Sounder fastened his jaws on a helpless weasel. The boy envisions the struggles of the weasel-like man, who paws the air before collapsing and falling on the ground in a heap. To the boy, the throttled oppressor would look "like when somebody untied the white rag that held the scarecrow to the stake.")

7. What do the journeys accomplish?

(In terms of rescue or communication, the boy's search for his father fails utterly. He visits prison camps and pities the sufferings of inmates. The attempt heartens his mother, who anticipates news of her husband's whereabouts and the length of his sentence. To the family's dismay, the many journeys never bring the boy to the quarry where the father works or to any prisoner who can direct him to the correct location.

However, the months of searching lead the boy to

newspapers and magazines and to opportunities to practice his reading. The discovery of a book of Montaigne's essays precedes the best discovery of all, the old teacher who encourages the boy with gentle acts of kindness and probing of the boy's intelligence. By removing the boy from a dead end existence on share-cropped land, the trips from the farm broaden his knowledge of people and start him on a lifelong pursuit of knowledge.)

8. What defeats the father?

(After the ripening of six crops of persimmons and wild grapes, Armstrong's implication of maturing years and bitter sufferings without a father, the wounded prisoner returns on foot. Badly crippled in a dynamite blast, he, like Sounder, walks off balance with a dangling arm and helpless foot. The shoulder pushes back into a hump that lies alongside the head. With twisted mouth and distorted voice, the "withered, wrinkled, lifeless" body reprises the scarecrow that the boy once fantasized about.

Stripped of half his manhood, the father speaks in a slow stutter about the dynamite blast that deadened one side under a limestone avalanche. Left for a night among dead and wounded prisoners, he recalls that his body went numb. Doctors set bones in a cast and predicted death, but the father refused to give up. The return of his half-immobile body betokens a resilience that at last reunites the family.)

Questions 9 and 10 Critical Level

9. Why does Armstrong compare Sounder to Argus?

(The allusion to Odysseus's journeys ties the novel to an epic journey that ends with the sailor's return and the collapse of his old dog Argus, who had awaited for twenty years to reunite with his master. In a 3,000 year-old story, the epic Greek hero experiences adventures and suffering following the siege of Troy. While his son Telemachus searches and his faithful wife Penelope attends to affairs at home, the wily sailor makes his tormented way home to Ithaca, where Argus greets him and dies of joy.

The father's long absence and Sounder's loyalty parallel Odysseus's experience. So, too, do the boy's search and the mother's faith. The simple nobility of the black family and the dog Sounder contribute to the novel's eloquence. Unlike the Greek story of a grand king restored to his throne, Sounder reveals the hardihood of an entire race of people. Like the epic hero, they endure mistreatment and racial hatred and survive out of spiritual goodness and unshaken human dignity.)

10. Why does Armstrong leave his characters unnamed?

(There are varied reasons for not identifying characters in any literary work. One aspect is the family's interrelatedness. Naming position in the home becomes the working method of identifying father, mother, son, and younger children. The focus of emotion and interpretation is the oldest boy, whose point of view dominates the novel and channels events into the total action. Another possibility is the oneness of the family, whose interdependence is enhanced by a lack of individual names.)

Questions 11 and 12 Creative Level

11. Characterize evenings around the stove as the father catches up on his family's life in the time he has been

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gone.

12. Act out a courtroom scene in which local people attest to the father's good character and the family's desperation for food.

ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Drama and Speech

1. Write several implied conversations, such as the mother trading walnuts for vanilla and the boy teaching his siblings to read.
2. Describe in a short speech the effects of loneliness, insecurity, disillusion, danger, arrest, cruelty, and yearning on characters in the story. How does the boy turn hardship into opportunity?
3. Form a team of readers to tape expanded, imaginative episodes of *Sounder*, for example, the boy's graduation or the mother's remarriage. Vary participants so that everyone has an opportunity to represent the family of sharecroppers. Keep the tape in the school library for other listeners to use.

Cinema

1. Draw segments of a storyboard for a stage version of *Sounder*. Show the placement of actors, music, costumes, props, sound effects, and lighting.
2. View various films about searches, e.g. *Jane Eyre* or *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Discuss why filmmakers focus on prejudice and economic hardship.

Science and Health

1. Make a time line of the boy's growth from age ten to his mid-teens. Determine at what point he sees his father taken away in handcuffs and when the father returns. Note specific times when the boy appears mature enough to be the man of the family.
2. Describe briefly the effects of oak acid on fresh wounds. Explain how the leaf juices heal Sounder.
3. Compose a short segment in which you report on the atmosphere of a night-time coon hunt. Explain why wind confuses the coon dog and why the lantern must be guarded.

Geography

Create a mural or web site that introduces these settings described or mentioned in the text, particularly foothills, dusty road, woods, fallow fields, rural cabins, town, courthouse, jail, bank, school, and prison camps. Determine how the story would change if it were set on the seashore among fishers or sailors.

Art

1. Create a bulletin board contrasting settings described or mentioned in the text, particularly the clothesline, mistletoe and bittersweet, Christmas bells and decorations, jail, cabin stove, woods, crawl space, mailbox, courthouse, bank, schoolyard, and stubby cornfield.
2. Using desktop publishing or other media, design a quilt patterned from events in a sharecropper's life, a page from a law text explaining the punishment for misdemeanor theft or breaking and entering, a sign indicating visiting hours at the jail or courthouse, a handbill offering cash for walnut meats and crumbs, a business card for the sheriff or visiting preacher, manual for teaching coon hounds to hunt, an illustrated entry on oak acid or red-bone hounds for an encyclopedia or science book, and a

schematic drawing of a cell or handcuffs.

3. Draw a book jacket or poster emphasizing the dual sufferings of master and dog. Indicate the continued relationship after the two are crippled.

Law

1. Launch an internet web site on the history of chain gangs. Account for movements to stop cruel punishments, which tend to fall disproportionately on non-whites.
2. List in order of importance the evidence that the father stole from a white man's smokehouse. Propose a defense that would spare him a lengthy sentence or heavy fine.
3. Characterize prison programs for families that maintain relationships between parent and child and that restore families to health once the sentence is completed.

Economics

1. Divide the class into small groups to study background elements of the story, particularly sharecropping, agriculture, sale of nuts or wood, prison labor, and hunting for food.
2. Create a bulletin board illustrating the life of sharecroppers. Suggest ways that the children are pressed into a cycle of poverty from hunger, inadequate education, race prejudice, and lowered expectations of success.
3. Explain the tradition of burial insurance. Discuss the mother's contentment in knowing that her husband will be properly buried in a box.

Social Studies and Education

1. Compose an informal essay on teaching children how to read. Note the use of headlines from a newspaper and illustrated magazine articles. List other free sources of reading material, for example, business forms, telephone directories, maps, billboards, government pamphlets, and packaging.
2. Sketch a chart depicting the increase of education among the underclass. Note states that still suffer high rates of illiteracy, particularly among farm families.

Psychology and Health

1. Analyze character interaction. Emphasize the role of the teacher in building the boy's self-esteem. Discuss the give and take of the first evening's storytelling.
2. Characterize the effects on children of seeing their father maligned, chained, and called "boy." Compose upbeat letters from the visiting preacher to the family while the father serves his sentence.

Composition

1. Write a theme in which you explain the role of a minor character, especially local children, jailer, prison camp guards, prisoners, townspeople, Christmas shoppers, store owner, deputies, and the mother's employers.
2. Compose a short speech in which you describe the role of Sounder in reaffirming the family's spirits.

Language and Speech

1. Compose individual posters explaining the significance of these terms: dog days, chunk-stick, persimmon, quarry, possum, husk, kernel, Mercy Seat, meetin'-house, chitlins, scrapple, spareribs, sowbelly, whetstone, scythe, brier hook, brambles, sumac, fat rind, cottonwood, patchwork, and ticking.

SOUNDER

2. Select Bible stories for a storytelling session. Choose Bible characters who display determination and the will to survive hard times.

Literature

1. Contrast the role of father and mother in educating children. Note where the boy learns patience, woods lore, manners, Bible stories, responsibility, farming, and religious faith.
2. Create and discuss a list of images from the novel that appeal to the five senses, for instance "The shattered shoulder never grew together enough to carry weight, so the great hunter with the single eye, his head held to one side so he could see, never hopped much farther from the cabin than the spot in the road where he had tried to jump on the wagon with his master."
3. Draw a character web representing the interconnectedness between the family, their employers, store clerk, and townspeople. Where do the visiting preacher, camp guards, prisoners, sheriff, deputies, and jailer belong on this chart?

History and Current Events

Identify world figures who have championed the rights of black people, such as Rosa Parks, William Wilberforce, and Frederick Douglass.

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES

1. Explain with pantomime, interpretive dance, mobile, or collage why the mother considers the teacher's invitation to be a sign from God.
2. Lead a debate about how to assist the children of imprisoned parents. Note the need for family interaction and for esteem-building exercises, such as delivering food and gifts and learning when a sentence will end.
3. Describe aloud the difference between Christmas celebrations in the cabin and in town. Characterize the value of mistletoe, bittersweet, and the one-layer cake to the boy and his siblings.
4. Compose a first person account of incarceration in a jail or prison camp, for example, dynamiting in a quarry or whitewashing rocks. Express the father's joy in being released to hobble home and live out his diminished life with his family.
5. Discuss your response toward digging a grave for Sounder before he dies. Does the boy complete the work to save his mother from a heavy job or to ready himself for the inevitable loss of the dog?
6. Discuss with a group the theme of challenge. Why is the walk to school a handicap? Why is literacy beneficial in interpreting the boy's experiences? How does the teacher offer opportunity for the whole family?
7. Apply a Freytag diagram to the novel. Label parts of the plot that form exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Why does this clear delineation of action lend itself well to radio, audio cassette, television drama, or the stage? What problems would a producer have in staging *Sounder* as a play, opera, TV miniseries, tableau, or outdoor musical drama?
8. Read aloud other descriptions of coming of age, such as Paula Fox's *Slave Dancer* or Yoko Kawashima Watkins's *So Far from the Bamboo Grove*. Discuss the importance of loss to main characters and explain how they

compensate.

9. Using examples from the book, locate skillful or colorful turns of phrase. Find examples of intense emotion, sense impressions, simile, onomatopoeia, alliteration, repetition, dialogue, realistic detail, dialect, symbolism, stock characters, literary foils, and foreshadowing.
10. Using the teacher as a model, compose an extended definition of mentor. Comment on the duality of Armstrong's teacher in the author's memories of an old man's prayers at the church balcony and the teacher who welcomes a wandering boy to his home.

ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT

1. List examples of work, fear, insecurity, intimidation, loyalty, poor judgment, and reward in the novel.
2. Compile a list of actions that demonstrate how crime jeopardizes an entire family.
3. Compose a scene in which the mother attends to the major farm chores.
4. Make a character list and explain the character flaws of each, including the jailer's cruelty, the guard's brutality, the father's willingness to take shortcuts, and the boy's immaturity.
5. Account for the author's use of personal memories as a springboard for fiction.
6. Apply St. Exupery's adage to the boy and his dog.

OTHER WORKS BY WILLIAM ARMSTRONG

Through Troubled Waters, 1957

The Peoples of the Ancient World (co-author Joseph W. Swain, 1959)

Barefoot in the Grass: The Story of Grandma Moses (1970)

Animal Tales (adaptation, 1970)

Sour Land (1971)

The MacLeod Place (1972)

Hadassah: Esther, the Orphan Queen (1972)

My Animals (1973)

The Mills of God (1973)

The Education of Abraham Lincoln (1974)

JoAnna's Miracle (1978)

Tawny and Dingo (1979)

RELATED READING

James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

Toni Cade Bambara, "Blues Ain't No Mockin' Bird"

Forrest Carter, *The Education of Little Tree*

Fred Gipson, *Old Yeller*

Lois Lowry, *The Giver*

F. N. Monjo, *Drinking Gourd*

Gary Paulsen, *Nightjohn*

Ann Petry, *Harriet Tubman*

Robert Newton Peck, *A Day No Pigs Would Die*

Wilson Rawls, *Where the Red Fern Grows*

Mildred Taylor, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*

Jane Wagner, *J. T.*

Richard Wright, "Almos' a Man"

Lawrence Yep, *Dragonwings*

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"Review," *Best Sellers*, November 1, 1969, p. 305.

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Townsend, John Rowe. *Written for Children: An Outline of English Language Children's Literature*. New York: Lip-pincott, 1974.

Twentieth-Century Children's Writers. Chicago: St. James Press, 1989.

Wood, George, "Review," *New York Times Book Review*, Nov. 9, 1969.

TEACHER'S NOTES

SOUNDER

VOCABULARY TEST

Complete each paragraph below with synonyms from the list that follows. Place your response in the blank provided.

- | | | | | |
|--------------|-------------|--------------|------------|------------|
| bulging | countryside | heritage | mellowness | rind |
| calloused | eloquent | humble | muscular | simplicity |
| chunk-stick | fallow | intoxication | oozing | slanting |
| clamp | flatlands | jaw-vise | overall | stern |
| clapboard | flutelike | juggler | precision | wavered |
| congregation | foothills | kernels | puncture | whimpering |

There was a lasting, magnificent (1) spirit about the man that has remained after half a century. There was seldom a preacher at the white-washed, (2) wooden Baptist church in the Green Hill district, so he came often to our white man's church and sat alone in the balcony. Sometimes the minister would call on this (3) rich-voiced, (4) lowly man to lead the (5) audience in prayer. He would move quietly to the foot of the balcony steps, pray with the (6) plainness of the Carpenter of Nazareth, and then return to where he sat alone, for no other black people ever came to join him.

Sounder was well named. When he treed a coon or possum in a persimmon tree or a wild-grape vine, his voice would roll across the (7) plain. It (8) echoed through the foothills, louder than any other dog's in the whole (9) area. What the boy saw in Sounder would have been totally missed by an outsider. The dog was not much to look at—a mixture of Georgia redbone hound and bulldog. His ears, nose, and color were those of a redbone. The great square jaws and head, his (10) sturdy neck and broad chest showed his bulldog blood. When a possum or coon was shaken from a tree, like a flash Sounder would (11) bite and set his (12) grip just behind the animal's head. Then he would spread his front paws, lock his shoulder joints, and let the (13) throbbing neck muscles fly from left to right. And that was all. The limp body, with not a torn spot or a tooth (14) mark in the skin, would be laid at his master's feet. His master's (15) hardened hand would rub the great neck, and he'd say "Good Sounder, good Sounder."

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____

9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____
13. _____
14. _____
15. _____

SOUNDER

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Complete each of these sentences with a response:

- _____ 1. Sounder's outstanding characteristic is
A. size. B. color. C. voice. D. hunting ability.
- _____ 2. The mother always hums when she is
A. happy. B. worried. C. rocking a sick child. D. extracting walnuts from their husks.
- _____ 3. When Sounder disappears, the mother believes he has
A. gone off to die. B. healed himself. C. gone to find his master. D. followed the wagon to the jail.
- _____ 4. The father tells his son
A. not to visit the jail again. B. to take the box back home.
C. to look for Sounder under a jack oak. D. to accept the offer of books.
- _____ 5. When the father sends no word, the boy decides
A. to search prison camps. B. to take over the role of parent to his siblings.
C. to ask white employers to read the court news aloud.
D. to sell mistletoe and bittersweet outside the courthouse.
- _____ 6. In a trash barrel, the boy finds
A. a redbone puppy. B. a copy of court news. C. stories by Aesop. D. essays by Montaigne.
- _____ 7. The father's crippling results from
A. a blow by an iron rod. B. shotgun wounds.
C. fighting with a prison guard who harms his son. D. a dynamite blast.
- _____ 8. Sounder
A. dies in October alongside his master. B. dies while the boy is at school.
C. lies on the master's grave outside the meetin' house.
D. follows the mother to town as her protector.
- _____ 9. The black family's response to white oppression is
A. to lie about the source of their ham and sausages.
B. to return the meat and request that the father serve a shorter sentence.
C. to endure patiently. D. to avoid white people.
- _____ 10. An old man's prayer
A. forces the jailer to admit the boy to the fourth cell. B. is the only service for the father.
C. ends a day at school. D. reminds the author of experiences among simple black people.

Part II: True or False (20 points)

In the blanks below, write **T** if the statement is complete or **F** if any part is incorrect.

- _____ 1. The boy, as youngest child, is left in charge of the stove.
- _____ 2. The mother turns to religion as a comfort.
- _____ 3. The father steals so he can buy ham and sausage for his family.
- _____ 4. The deputy shoots Sounder because the dog leaps at the side of the wagon.
- _____ 5. When the boy visits the jail, his father promises to send word with the visiting preacher.
- _____ 6. The boys does not attend school because it is too far from the cabin.
- _____ 7. The boy questions the way most Bible stories end.
- _____ 8. Because the mother is illiterate, she fails to respect the boy's accomplishment.
- _____ 9. The boy locates his father at hard labor in a prison quarry.
- _____ 10. The father is proud that his son is bettering himself.

SOUNDER

Part III: Sequence (20 points)

Number the following incidents according to their chronology in the story.

- _____ 1. The boy visits the father on Christmas Day.
- _____ 2. A sheriff's deputy strikes the father with a chain.
- _____ 3. A black teacher befriends the boy.
- _____ 4. The father tears his clothes at the smokehouse door.
- _____ 5. A prison guard smashes the boy's fingers against a wire fence.
- _____ 6. The boy finds a book of Montaigne's essays.
- _____ 7. The boy learns to read.
- _____ 8. The father is injured in an explosion.
- _____ 9. Sounder comes back.
- _____ 10. Sounder dies.

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Discuss the meaning of two the following quotations from the novel.

1. You've gotta walk that lonesome valley,
You've gotta walk it by yourself,
Ain't nobody else gonna walk it for you.
2. It's all powerful puzzlin' and aggravatin', but it's the Lord's will.
3. A man keeps, like his love, his courage dark.
4. He didn't want to be shot down like a dog in the road.

SOUNDER

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Complete each of these sentences with a response:

- _____ 1. The author compares Sounder to
A. a possum. B. the seasons. C. a jack oak. D. Argus.
- _____ 2. The boy's father steals
A. a book from a trash barrel. B. a redbone puppy. C. ham and sausage. D. nothing.
- _____ 3. The red-faced man
A. refuses to let the boy see his father on a holiday. B. laughs at the crushed fingers.
C. chokes a bull. D. crumbles the cake and spills some on the floor.
- _____ 4. When Sounder returns, he can't
A. bark. B. eat from the tin pan. C. walk on three legs. D. hear animal sounds.
- _____ 5. A guard
A. saves the father from a dynamite blast. B. fetches the visiting preacher.
C. smashes down with a piece of iron. D. whitewashes rocks.
- _____ 6. The boy's favorite Bible character is
A. David. B. Joseph. C. Jacob. D. Argus.
- _____ 7. The father dies
A. in the cabin. B. alongside his lantern. C. while hunting. D. on the dusty road home.
- _____ 8. Reading benefits the boy by
A. opening a new world of experience. B. helping him find the way to prison camps in nearby counties.
C. enabling him to support his mother. D. helping him overcome racism.
- _____ 9. The boy has never
A. seen decorations made from mistletoe. B. felt clothes drying on the line.
C. tried to take walnut meats from the bowl. D. looked out through curtained windows.
- _____ 10. The mother tolerates
A. the boy's desire to hunt raccoons without his father. B. a whining dog in the house.
C. the boy's use of the lantern to search for Sounder.
D. employers who pay her to weed and wash curtains.

Part II: True or False (20 points)

In the blanks below, write true if the statement is complete or false if any part is incorrect.

- _____ 1. The father addresses the wind and sky.
- _____ 2. Sounder is part redbone and part bulldog.
- _____ 3. The sheriff has no evidence of a crime.
- _____ 4. The boy finds part of an ear in the road.
- _____ 5. The mother dislikes feeding Sounder when he is no longer useful.
- _____ 6. The mother reads Bible stories aloud.
- _____ 7. The boy improves his reading by practicing on discarded newspapers and magazines.
- _____ 8. The white-haired black man explains that Montaigne wrote about events that are no longer important.
- _____ 9. Sounder acts like a young dog when his master limps toward home.
- _____ 10. When the father dies, there is no money for a coffin.

SOUNDER

Part III: Identification (20 points)

Match each description with

boy
father

jailer
mother

road camp guard
school teacher

sheriff
Sounder

- _____ 1. Can do the work of two men in a single day
- _____ 2. Dreams of taking revenge
- _____ 3. Tells the children not to ask for candy
- _____ 4. Ruins the cake
- _____ 5. Earns money by doing other people's laundry
- _____ 6. Cleans and bandages the boy's wounded hand
- _____ 7. Smashes the boy's fingers with an iron bar
- _____ 8. Goes on journey's in the autumn
- _____ 9. Arrests the father
- _____ 10. Tries to follow when the father is taken away

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

- 1. In what ways is Sounder a "human animal?"
- 2. Compare the boy's and the mother's reaction to the father's arrest.
- 3. What difficulties does the boy encounter on his travels, and how does he deal with them?
- 4. Describe the boy's relationship with his father, and how the relationship gradually reverses.

SOUNDER

ANSWER KEY

VOCABULARY TEST

- | | |
|-----------------|----------------|
| 1. intoxication | 9. countryside |
| 2. clapboard | 10. muscular |
| 3. eloquent | 11. clamp |
| 4. humble | 12. jaw-vise |
| 5. congregation | 13. bulging |
| 6. simplicity | 14. puncture |
| 7. flatlands | 15. calloused |
| 8. wavered | |

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. C | 6. D |
| 2. B | 7. D |
| 3. A | 8. B |
| 4. A | 9. C |
| 5. A | 10. D |

Part II: True or False (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. T |
| 2. T | 7. F |
| 3. F | 8. F |
| 4. T | 9. F |
| 5. T | 10. T |

Part III: Sequence (20 points)

- | | |
|------|--------|
| 1. 3 | 6. 6 |
| 2. 2 | 7. 5 |
| 3. 8 | 8. 9 |
| 4. 1 | 9. 4 |
| 5. 7 | 10. 10 |

Part III: Sequencing (20 points)

- | | |
|------|--------|
| 1. 3 | 6. 6 |
| 2. 2 | 7. 5 |
| 3. 8 | 8. 9 |
| 4. 1 | 9. 4 |
| 5. 7 | 10. 10 |

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: True or False (20 points)

- | | |
|-------|-------|
| 1. T | 6. F |
| 2. T | 7. T |
| 3. F | 8. F |
| 4. T | 9. T |
| 5. F. | 10. F |

Part II: Multiple Choice (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. B | 6. C |
| 2. C | 7. B |
| 3. D | 8. A |
| 4. A | 9. D |
| 5. C | 10. C |

Part III: Identification (20 points)

- | | |
|-----------|--------------------|
| 1. father | 6. schoolteacher |
| 2. boy | 7. road camp guard |
| 3. boy | 8. boy |
| 4. jailer | 9. sheriff |
| 5. mother | 10. Sounder |

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.



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