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Sounder

by

W. H. Armstrong



MonkeyNotes Edited by Diane Sauder

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

Set in the late nineteenth century, the novel is a segment of the life and times of an impoverished black sharecropper's family in the Southern United States. The main setting is an isolated, dingy cabin situated on the fringes of a white man's plantation. The action also moves down a dusty road with

CHARACTER LIST

(The author has chosen not to name his human characters; instead, they are referred to by their position, such as Mother, Father, Son, or Sheriff. The only character to bear a name is the family dog, Sounder.)

Major Characters

Boy - the protagonist of the novel, who is a sensitive child. He must endure loneliness, lack of education, poverty, and discrimination; as a result, he often identifies his plight with that of Joseph in the Bible. The boy is forced by circumstances to grow up quickly. When his father is taken away to jail, he must shoulder the responsibilities of his family. He is given hope towards the end of the novel by the schoolteacher who offers him a chance to better himself through education.

Father - a black sharecropper who strives hard to earn a decent living for his family. Poverty compels him to steal. When he is caught, he is imprisoned. He returns at the close of the novel, weak and disfigured.

Sounder - a ferocious coonhound dog, fiercely devoted to his masters, the black sharecropper and his family. The sheriff's deputy shoots him when he is chasing the wagon that is carrying the father away to jail. He disappears in the woods to nurse his wounds and returns home in the middle of the novel; just like his master who comes home later, he is debilitated and maimed.

Mother - a kind, timid, and patient woman, who faces hardships stoically. Although not very strong, she fights in her own way for her family's survival. She has a great deal of faith in God and teaches her children Bible stories.

Schoolteacher - a kind, learned soul who is moved by the boy's plight and makes provisions for the boy to attend school. He is the agent of change in the boy's life.

Minor Characters

Sheriff - a jeering, ruthless, prejudiced white officer, who is corrupted by power. He boastfully claims to smell 'a ham cooking' and 'a thievin nigger' from a mile. When he arrests Father, he treats him.....

CONFLICT

Protagonist - The boy is the protagonist of the novel, and the plot is really a telling of his coming of age and maturing into a premature adulthood. After his father is imprisoned by the State, the boy, the oldest child in the family, is forced by circumstance into tending the fields in order to provide for the.....

Antagonist - The boy's antagonists are the hardships he must face in life, and there are many. They include the loneliness, dreariness, and isolation of his life in the small cabin, the poverty and hunger he must endure on a daily basis, the discrimination he feels by the white community, the lack of education, the

Climax - The climax of the story arises out of an unfortunate incident that turns out well. When the boy is peering into a work camp trying to locate his father, his hand is seriously injured. The white

Outcome - The plot ends as a tragic comedy. In the process of growing up, the boy endures unbelievable hardships, including the death of his father and his dog. But the boy, forced into premature.....

Symbolic Conflict

On a symbolic level, the conflict can be viewed in terms of a clash between the life giving forces of love, devotion, and justice (as symbolized in the faithfulness of Sounder, the love of the family, and the justice of the teacher) and the life-negating forces of injustice, inhumanity, indifference, and

SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

On the outermost reach of a white man's field, there is a tiny, quaint cabin where a black sharecropper lives with his family and a coon dog named Sounder. In the spring, summer, and fall, Father works in the fields to provide for his family. In winter, when the work in the fields comes to a halt, the black sharecropper goes to hunt coons with Sounder, his hound. His wife washes people's clothes and sells walnut kernels to supplement the family's meager income. Their eldest son helps them out with the chores. Although they are a poor family, they are close and loving.

When it becomes difficult to hunt due to the extreme cold, Father steals a pig in order to feed his children; although he knows the theft is wrong, he feels it is better than seeing his family starve. The robbery, however, is discovered, and the Sheriff and his men come out to arrest the 'thieven nigger.' Sounder is outraged to see his master being chained and dragged; he tries to attack the Sheriff. When everyone, including Father, is in the Sheriff's wagon, the deputy turns and fires a shot at Sounder. The dog collapses and then runs away. The boy is crushed over the injury to his dog; he puts his heart, soul, and strength into searching for Sounder, but the dog has obviously retreated far into the backwoods. Mother believes that the dog has gone to the woods to heal his wounds and will return.

At Christmas, Mother bakes a cake for her husband, who is still in jail. She tells her son to deliver the cake to his father. The jail keeper is very nasty to the boy; while pretending to check if there are any weapons baked in it, he smashes the lovely cake. The boy is extremely hurt, and his father, sensing the boy's

MOOD

The mood of the novel is mostly depressing, with a sense of loneliness and suppressed pain throughout. The cruelties inflicted on blacks by the white community greatly contribute to the depressing atmosphere.

THEMES

Major Theme

The central theme of the novel is the value of having dignity, courage, and love in the face of adversity. This theme comes across through the

Minor Theme

Almost as important as the main theme of the novel is the secondary theme of alienation and loneliness endured by black people as a result of

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

W. H. ARMSTRONG

William Howard Armstrong was born on September 14, 1914, in Lexington, Virginia to Howard Gratton Armstrong, a farmer, and his wife, Ida Morris. As a child, William had a neighbor who entertained him with wonderful stories. One of his favorite stories was about a coonhound with a wonderful bark. This dog tale

was later to serve as the basis for his famous novel, *Sounder*.

William attended public schools and was a good student. He graduated from Hampden-Sydney College with honors in 1936 and went on to do graduate studies at the University of Virginia. In 1945, he became a history teacher at Kent School, in Kent, Connecticut, where he built his own house and raised sheep on the side. William lived, taught, and wrote in Kent for all of his adult life. In 1943, William married Martha Stone Street Williams, and they had three children.

Armstrong began his literary career by writing non-fiction books. *Study is Hard Work* was published in 1956, followed by *Through Troubled Waters* in 1957 and *The Peoples of the Ancient World* in 1969.

Before he published *Sounder*, there were also three self-improvement books: *87 ways to Help Your Child in School* (1961), *Tools of Thinking* (1968), and *Word Power in 5 Easy Lessons* (1969). From 1969.....

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

When slavery was abolished in the Southern United States in 1865, most black slaves had no skills except in farming and no money to buy their own land. As a result, most of the freed slaves stayed on with their past masters, working as sharecroppers. Under the sharecropping arrangement, the freed slave would grow crops on the plantation owned by the white gentleman farmer. He would then share the profits from.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

Chapter 1

Summary

On the most distant fringe of a white man's field, there is a tiny ramshackle cabin where a black sharecropper lives with his wife, his children, and his dog named Sounder. Life is hard for this black family; even though they are hard working, decent folks, there is usually not enough to eat and never enough money for even the basic necessities of life.

Sounder is an integral part of the family, loved by all. Even though he can be a ferocious coon dog, he serves as a pet for the family; he is also a good and reliable hunting companion. Sounder has appropriately been given his name because of his thundering voice.

At the start of the novel, winter has set in; the fields are barren, and the crop has not been good. Father is forced to find alternative means for feeding his family. Accompanied by his faithful dog Sounder, he ventures forth to hunt for coons every evening; but hunting in winter is very difficult, for the earth is frozen and possums and coons are scarce. He usually returns home in a dejected mood with an empty sack. He is miserable when he cannot provide sufficient food for his family to eat. The whole family tries to help out. The eldest child collects walnuts from the woods; Mother cracks and picks the nuts and sells them to the local store for fifteen cents a pound. She also washes clothes for the people who live in the big house down the road.

To everyone's surprise, one night Father goes out by himself without Sounder. The next morning the children wake up to the delicious aroma of simmering ham. The boy watches with fascination as Father lifts the lid off the pot with his bare hands and lays the ham on oak slabs. Within a few minutes, the children finish a scrumptious meal.

After eating, Mother resumes her task of picking walnuts; she hums a melancholic tune as she works. Several times Father wipes the steam from the windowpane and peers outside, as if he were looking for something.

The boy wishes that his mother would stop and tell him some Bible stories; they always helped to drive away the dreariness of the cabin. The child also wishes that his parents could read and hopes that someday he will be able to,

Notes

Through an omniscient third-person narrator, *Sounder* tells the story of a remarkable black family and their dog, named Sounder. In the preface to the book, the author states that it is really the childhood history of his own teacher, who is the young boy in the novel.

This opening chapter is largely introductory, presenting the main characters, the basic conflict, and the setting. The poor black family, living in the Southern United States, inhabits a run-down cabin on the far reaches of a white man's field; they have no neighbors and no means of entertainment. The father is a hard working sharecropper, farming the land; but there is never enough food for the family or money for the necessities of life. It is a hard, bleak existence, but it is obvious that the family loves one another and has real human values. Although the parents cannot read, they tell their children stories from the Bible. They also have instilled in them a desire to better themselves.

Sounder, a coon dog, is a key part of the family and a main character in the novel; he is a symbol of humanity and represents the values of faithfulness, love, and devotion. It is ironic that a dog is a much kinder and better being than most of the white folks that will be presented in the novel. He has been given the name of Sounder because of his full-throated, roaring voice that resounds through the woods when he is hunting with his master; in truth, he becomes the "sounder" of real human value in the novel.

This opening chapter clearly sets the mood of loneliness and isolation that pervades the entire novel. Because it is black, this family is forced to live in poverty--on the physical outskirts of civilization and the emotional outskirts of life; the prejudiced white community wants nothing to do with them and often treats them shabbily. The sense of loneliness is intensified by several things in this first chapter. First it is wintertime, and everything is dead and frozen; the land is barren and the wildlife is scarce. Father finds it hard to put adequate food on the table. Secondly, Mother is always humming a haunting melody, the notes of "the lonesome valley." Additionally, the boy talks about his dreary existence. He longs for his mother to stop her chores and tell him a Bible story to drive the loneliness away. Finally, the fact that the members of this family are given no names emphasizes the fact that they are isolated from life and undervalued by society.

The first chapter also gives character descriptions. The father is a tall, strong man, a hard worker, a dedicated father, and a good hunter. His love and concern for his family come before all else. In the middle of winter, he goes hunting every night, hoping to put food on the table. When his efforts fail, he betrays his own values and steals a pig in order to feed his children. The mother is also a hard worker. She earns extra money for the family by doing household chores for white people and picking walnuts to sell for fifteen cents a pound. The oldest child, a son, is a smart young lad who is always eager to help his parents; he gathers the walnuts for his mother to pick and helps with all the family chores. He longs for a better life, hoping to be able to read someday. The boy, however, is clearly in awe of his father; he consciously observes and tries to mimic his dad's behavior and actions. The closeness that he feels to him makes his abrupt departure in the next chapter more painful.

Chapter 2

Summary

On the third day after the family had first enjoyed the ham, three uniformed officers arrive at the cabin; they force their way inside and arrest Father, accusing him of stealing a pig. The grease-stained tablecloth, the remnants of ham bone on the oak-slab, and the threads from Father's overalls found at the pigsty are all the

evidence the officers need to judge the black man as guilty. They rudely chain “the thieven nigger” and drag him to their police wagon. When Sounder sees his master being mistreated, he barks ferociously and comes after the officers. The sheriff tells the boy to hold the dog back; he warns that if the dog comes closer, he will shoot the animal.

The boy tries to hold back Sounder with all his strength, but the dog becomes uncontrollable as he watches Father being forcefully thrust into the wagon. When it starts to move, Sounder lunges forward, knocking the boy down in the process. When the deputy sees the dog chasing the wagon, he shoots Sounder, whose body goes limp and falls to the ground. Although his own head is throbbing in pain, the boy wants to run to Sounder, but he cannot make himself move; he is afraid to find out if the dog is dead or alive. When he hears Sounder’s agonizing cries, the boy forgets his own pain and races to his dog. Although Sounder is still alive, he is badly hurt. As the boy watches the blood ooze from the dog’s head, he is moved to tears. Mother tells her son to leave the dog alone, for animals like to die in peace and solitude. The boy reluctantly obeys his mother; but he cannot stand it for long. He goes back out to help Sounder. He finds the dog’s detached, blood-soaked ear, but Sounder is nowhere to be seen. He takes the ear home with him, believing it will bring him good luck.

That night the loneliness, which always pervades the cabin, is heavier than ever because of the absence of Father and Sounder. When the boy finally goes to bed, he puts the dog's ear under his pillow and makes a wish on it; he hopes that Sounder will survive and come home. It is an innocent and touching scene.

Notes

The scene of Father’s arrest in front of his whole family is a cruel and tragic event. The officers do not care that he has stolen a pig in order to feed his starving children; instead, they treat him brutally, chaining him and pushing him like a hardened criminal. Additionally, they warn the boy to hold back Sounder; if the dog comes close to them, the officers promise to shoot him. It is obvious that these white officers believe that blacks are simply no-good, sub-human creatures.

In sharp and ironic contrast to the Sheriff’s inhumanity is Sounder’s “humanity;” the dog’s devotion and concern for his master is extremely touching. Even though the boy tries with all his might to hold on to his dog, Sounder lunges away and towards the wagon that is departing with his master. When the deputy sees the approaching coon hound, he fires a shot that hits and fells Sounder.

The boy is also wounded. When Sounder pulls away from him, he is pushed to the ground, hitting his head. Then he watches as his dog is shot; now the boy is hurt, physically and emotionally. Both his head and his heart throb in pain. Though he wants to run to Sounder, he is afraid that he will find that his beloved dog is dead. When he finally hears Sounder howling in pain, he goes to help him, disregarding his own pounding head. He cries when he sees the blood oozing from the dog’s head.

Mother calls the boy away, saying that a dog likes to die alone. Dutifully, the boy at first obeys his Mother; but after a short time, he can stand it no longer. He goes back to help Sounder and is surprised to find that the dog is gone. Although the boy searches for his injured pet, the only thing that he can find is the dog’s severed and bloody ear, which he puts in his pocket to take home. The boy’s childish innocence and optimism can be seen in his hope that if he puts the dog’s ear under his pillow and makes a wish, Sounder will survive.

The father’s arrest is a turning point in the boy’s life. Now that he is the oldest male living in the family, he must take on lots of new responsibilities. Many changes in him will occur throughout the rest of the novel.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The Boy - The boy is the protagonist of the novel, and his tale is one of growing to maturity. At the onset of the story, he stands on the porch gazing wide-eyed at the tall presence of his black father and running his fingers over his coon dog, Sounder. The image is that of a wide-eyed little boy who worships his parent and his pet dog. It is quickly established that the boy is a caring and obedient child, always willing to assist his mother in the domestic chores. The boy is also sensitive to the family's plight of poverty; he knows that his parents struggle, and he attempts to help by gathering walnuts for his mother to crack and sell. The boy also refrains from complaining about his lonely existence and his lack of education, although he would love to have friends and know how to read.

The boy's education comes from his parents. His father teaches him about farming, and his mother teaches him about life. Although she cannot read herself, she tells him all the stories from the Bible, which the boy memorizes for himself. Like his mother, he is deeply inspired by these Bible tales and draws.....

The Father - Father is a black sharecropper living and farming on the fringes of a white man's plantation. He is pictured as a tall, strong, handsome man, who is not afraid of hard work and who loves to hunt with his coonhound Sounder. Father, however, is pained by his family's poverty and miserable over their hunger. In winter, when there are no crops and no game to hunt, he steals a pig to feed his family. As a result, he is chained by the Sheriff and put in jail; later he is sent to do hard labor in the quarries, and the family does not hear from him for years. The oldest son constantly goes out to search for his father or to find out news about him.

In the final pages of the book, Father returns home, a totally changed man. No longer is he strong, handsome, and proud; instead he is bent over and walks with a limp. He is also terribly scarred, both.....

Sounder - Early in the novel the boy says, "There ain't no dog like Sounder." The narrator comments, "What the boy saw in Sounder would have been totally missed by an outsider." In other words, a

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

Sounder is a simple, well-knit, and straightforward story with a single plot line revolving around the boy growing into maturity and being given a chance in life. The tale is told by a third person omniscient narrator, with an emphasis on the boy's perspective and with simple dialogue that successfully captures the black dialect. The entire story is also unfolded in a chronological order so that the plot is easily followed by the reader.

The structure of the novel is classic in form. The first chapter introduces the reader to all the members of the black sharecropper's family, including the dog; it also establishes the setting and the key ingredients of the conflict, especially the poverty, loneliness, and discrimination that the boy and his family must endure. Hints of future trouble are foreshadowed in the first chapter when the family has a scrumptious

THEMES ANALYSIS

Major Themes

The novel is about faith, loyalty, dignity, courage, and love as an antidote to inhumanity, disillusionment, and failure. Throughout the story the boy must endure unbelievable pain: his father is arrested and imprisoned; his dog is shot and runs away; he must quickly change from childhood to adulthood in order to work the fields and provide for the family; he experiences repeated discrimination from the white community; and he is

unsuccessful in finding his father in any of his many searches. In spite of these hardships, the boy knows the love of God and the love of his family, especially from his kind-hearted mother. This love gets.....

Minor Themes

The alienation and discrimination of blacks and the resulting pain of loneliness and isolation that the black community experiences are delicately wrought as another theme in the novel. The cabins of the black community are on the far reaches of the white man's fields; they are intentionally

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. "Although a tragic story of man's inhumanity to man, this is also an uplifting tale of courage, human dignity, and love." Fully explain this statement using specific details from the novel.
2. Describe some of the tragic experiences the boy must endure. What is his reaction to them? How do they change him?.....

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