

Class Activities for *A Son Comes Home*

Instructors have approached *A Son Comes Home* in a variety of ways. Here are some class activities and discussion questions that students may find engaging as they consider the literary elements of the novel:

Point of View

One literary technique that sets *A Son Comes Home* apart from many other novels is its use of three alternating first-person narrators. Ask students how they responded to that technique. What purpose does it serve to hear the story from multiple voices? Are there any drawbacks to this technique?

Here are two activities that may work well to illustrate the importance of point of view choices:

Choose a Fourth Narrator

If the author had chosen to include a fourth narrator in addition to Chris, Jack, and Robin, whom should he have chosen? Bobby? David? Helen? Ask students to choose a fourth narrator and discuss or write how that person's perspective might have been significantly different from the current three narrators. Are there any characters who definitely should *not* be included as a narrator? Why?

Write an Epilogue

What will these characters' lives be like a year from the end of the book? Five years? Ask the students to write an epilogue in which one of the characters speaks out from the future. From whose point of view should the epilogue be written, and why? It may be helpful to have some students read their chapters out loud to the rest of the class.

Prodigal Son Theme

A Son Comes Home has a number of connections to the biblical parable of the Prodigal Son, found in Luke 15:11-32.

First, ask the students to read the parable, or have someone read it out loud to the class.

Second, ask students in groups or individually to identify the key elements of the Prodigal Son story. In other words, what elements would any story need to contain if it were to be considered a true "prodigal son" story? After students come up with their lists, write their ideas on the board and see if you can come to a consensus as a class on what this list should contain.

You might also want to discuss, in what ways have students heard this story used in sermons and other retellings? What does it mean to them personally? Why is it such a popular story that is familiar even to people who have never read it in the Bible?

Third, ask the students individually or in groups to identify all the possible "prodigal sons" (or daughters) in the novel. In one class, this was framed as a quiz question, with ten extra-credit bonus points going to the

student who could make a plausible case for the largest number of "prodigal persons" in the book. (The winning student identified eight). After the students have composed their lists, write their answers on the board and ask them to make a case for each person as a prodigal. See if the class can come to a consensus about this. As with the earlier question about the key characteristics of a prodigal son story, the reasons for the students' choices are just as significant and thought-provoking as the choices themselves.

Conflict

A Son Comes Home is filled with conflicts of many kinds, and students can easily list a dozen or more conflicts without even reopening the book. Asking them to make such a list might be a good place to start, but for a more careful analysis of the concept of conflict in the book, ask the students to analyze how various conflicts are weaved into a particular scene.

One chapter that works well for this purpose is the "chili supper" chapter that Chris narrates on Pages 61-68. In this scene Aunt Dayle invites the relatives to her home for a homecoming get-together for Chris. Just as she used to do when Chris was growing up, she makes a pot of her famous chili, and the family plays Monopoly together. It sounds like a fun evening, and in many ways it is, but many conflicts are smoldering just beneath the surface.

Ask the students not only to identify those conflicts, but also to examine how they are shown. What tensions are *stated*, and what ones are concealed from other characters? Is this scene an interlude within the plot of the novel, or do the conflicts within it further the plot in some way? What do the conflicts in this scene reveal about the central characters in the book? Do they show a different side of their personality to their relatives than we see in other contexts?

Plots and Subplots

It's easy to find good definitions of the terms "plot" and "subplot" in any literature anthology, but *A Son Comes Home* is a good example of a book that weaves together the plot and subplots in complex and unexpected ways.

One activity you can use to illustrate the plot and subplots of the novel is to break the class into small groups and give each group large sheets of paper and colored markers. After reviewing the definitions of "plot" and "subplot," ask them to find a way to illustrate the plot and subplots in *A Son Comes Home*. They may use whatever illustration works best. For instance, one group that did this drew a tree in which Chris's story represented the trunk and various branches represented the subplots that featured other characters. The group summarized the plot and subplots with phrases in each branch. Another group used a series of intersecting timelines of different colors. One group used a vine with branches, leaves, and fruits.

A follow-up to this activity might be to examine what role the subplots play in the story. Are they necessary? Are any of them distracting? Is it hard to separate the subplots from the plot?

Symbols

A good way to approach the use of symbolism in the novel is to ask the students to brainstorm all the possible symbols in the book. Put this list on the board and then examine whether the items are really symbols or whether they are functioning in some other way.

To deepen this discussion, choose from this list some of the most important symbols, such as Jack's '51 Chevy or Helen's family photo album, and ask the students to analyze how these items are used differently as the novel progresses. What meaning does Jack's Chevy have when Chris first sees it upon his arrival in Indiana? What does the car mean to Chris at the end of the book?

Ask the students how aware they were of these symbols as they read the book. Do they believe the book still would be meaningful to readers who never noticed the symbols at all?

Setting

What are the various settings of this book, and how are they used symbolically? For instance, many of the characters spend time in Chicago throughout the book, but does that city have the same meaning for each character? What does Chicago represent to David? To Chris? To Robin? To Bobby? What about California? What does it represent to Chris?

Character

Ask students to cast this book as a movie. Who would play the major roles and why? Who is easiest to cast? Who is hardest? Do this in groups and then ask each group to share its casting choices with the whole class. It's fun to hear students debate and defend their choices and to see how much overlap between groups. What do these decisions show about how the students view these characters?

***A Son Comes Home* Class Worksheets**

English Prof. Paula Miller of Biola University has successfully taught A Son Comes Home several times in one of her literature courses. The following pages are worksheets she uses to help the students in their study of the book:

A Son Comes Home

Discussion Groups

Select a chapter from the reading to focus on for your group's discussion of the text. Chat about the questions for each category and record your various responses on a separate sheet.

List Chapter title along with page numbers for the passage your group chose for discussion:

1. To what extent were you able to get "into" this chapter?

Did you feel like you were able to get inside the setting of this text and *be* there?

Did you identify with a particular character? Why or why not?

Did something happen in the chapter in terms of events that really gripped you and drew you in?

Did you feel like you could relate to the characters in any way? If so, how?

How did being able to get into the text (or not being able to get into it) make you feel about what you were reading?

2. As you read, what personal connections were you able to make between your experience and the text?

Did the text call up personal memories for you (of experiences, events, people)?

Did the text remind you of other books, stories, or movies you have read or seen?

Did the text make you think of real events in the news or in situations you've known that have occurred in the present or past?

To what extent did your ability to connect (or your inability to connect) with this text influence you as a reader? Were you more or less involved in it because of the connections you did or didn't make?

3. On a scale of 5 (It was great!) to 1 (It was awful!), how would you rate this chapter?

What did you like best or least about this passage?

What did the author do (or not do) that caused you to respond to the text as you did?

If the members of your group had varied responses to the rating scale, how do you account for the different perceptions among the group members?

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pp. 101-152

Discussion Topics

Unresolved Conflicts: Love Relationships, Parent-child Relationships, Christian Friendships

Jack pp. 101-104
Chris pp. 105-106
Robin pp. 107-108
Jack pp. 109-110
Robin pp. 111-114
Chris pp. 115-122
Robin pp. 123-128
Chris pp. 129-132
Robin pp. 133-136
Chris pp. 137-138
Robin pp. 139-145
Chris pp. 146-152

Pregnancy / Abortion

Jack pp. 101-104
Chris pp. 105-106
Robin pp. 107-108
Jack pp. 109-110
Robin pp. 111-114
Chris pp. 115-122
Robin pp. 123-128
Chris pp. 129-132
Robin pp. 133-136
Chris pp. 137-138
Robin pp. 139-145
Chris pp. 146-152

Secrets / Deception / Scandal and the aftermath

Jack pp. 101-104
Chris pp. 105-106
Robin pp. 107-108
Jack pp. 109-110
Robin pp. 111-114
Chris pp. 115-122
Robin pp. 123-128
Chris pp. 129-132
Robin pp. 133-136
Chris pp. 137-138
Robin pp. 139-145
Chris pp. 146-152

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Discussion Topics

Christian Conviction and Behavior / Responsibility versus Human Failure

Jack pp. 101-104
Chris pp. 105-106
Robin pp. 107-108
Jack pp. 109-110
Robin pp. 111-114
Chris pp. 115-122
Robin pp. 123-128
Chris pp. 129-132
Robin pp. 133-136
Chris pp. 137-138
Robin pp. 139-145
Chris pp. 146-152

Disillusionment / Unrealized Dreams or Failed Expectations

Jack pp. 101-104
Chris pp. 105-106
Robin pp. 107-108
Jack pp. 109-110
Robin pp. 111-114
Chris pp. 115-122
Robin pp. 123-128
Chris pp. 129-132
Robin pp. 133-136
Chris pp. 137-138
Robin pp. 139-145
Chris pp. 146-152

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Discussion Questions

“Jack” Chapters (pp.101-104, 109-110)

1. How does Jack view his present stage of life?
2. Why are the family photos a source of pain rather than nostalgia for Jack?
3. What does he reveal about his feelings for his children?

David—

Chris—

Robin—

4. How is his faith expressed?
5. What secret does Jack reveal? How do his chapters advance the plot?
6. When Robin reveals her “secret” (pp. 139-145), how does Jack respond? Are you surprised by his reaction? Why or why not?

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Discussion Questions

“Chris” (pp. 105-106, 115-122, 129-132, 146-152)

1. What does the conversation about the family photos reveal about Chris’s and David’s relationship?
2. How does Chris respond when he meets Beth for the first time? What surprises him about the encounter?
3. What interesting details are revealed through Chris’ interactions with Pastor Jennings?
4. Characterize Chris’s faith at this point in the novel.
5. How does Chris respond to the family dilemma once Robin reveals her secret to the family?
6. What is revealed about his character through his actions with Beth and his parents when Robin disappears?

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Discussion Questions

“Robin” (pp. 107-108,111-114, 123-128,133-136,139-145)

1. What does the phone conversation between Robin and Bobby reveal about her attitudes toward their relationship? (107-108)
2. Why do Bobby’s complaints stun Robin?
3. Why does Robin want to marry Bobby? Is she motivated by love or something else?
4. What attitudes does Robin express about abortion? Are you surprised by her struggle to decide what is right to do?
5. Why is it difficult for Robin to explain her situation to her parents? What keeps teenagers from discussing sexual situations with the “safe” adults in their lives?
6. How would you characterize Robin’s personality and the depth of her faith based on her thoughts and actions?

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pp. 101-152

Discussion Questions

Bobby (pp. 107-108, 111-114, 123-128, 133-136, 139-145)

1. Describe the relationship Bobby has with the three main characters in the novel.

Chris—

Jack—

Robin—

2. What does the phone conversation between Robin and Bobby reveal about their relationship? (pp107-108)
3. How does Bobby respond to the news that Robin is pregnant? Is his response surprising?
4. What is his reason for traveling to New York? Will he really come to Robin's aid as he has promised?
5. Does Bobby express any attitudes or actions related to Christian faith? Why has the Christian community in the local church fully embraced him?
6. Does Bobby care for Robin? Explain the reasons for his apparent influence over her.

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Based on the action that occurs in the novel from pp.203-259, provide the following information assuming you are looking at the situations presented from a particular character's point of view. Cite page numbers to support your viewpoints.

I am Cheryl:

People describe me as

My suspicions and/or fears:

My motives and actions:

Here's how I feel about

David—

Beth—

Tracy—

A Son Comes Home

Based on the action that occurs in the novel from pp.203-259, provide the following information assuming you are looking at the situations presented from a particular character's point of view. Cite page numbers to support your viewpoints.

I am Beth:

People describe me as

My suspicions and/or fears:

My motives and actions:

Here's how I feel about

David—

Chris—

Cheryl—

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Based on the action that occurs in the novel from pp.203-259, provide the following information assuming you are looking at the situations presented from a particular character's point of view. Cite page numbers to support your viewpoints.

I am David:

People describe me as

My suspicions and/or fears:

My motives and actions:

Here's how I feel about

Cheryl—

Chris—

Tracy—

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Literature in Context

Describe how the story ends for the following characters. Are the endings satisfying? Why or why not?

Chris:

Robin:

Jack:

What is the theme of the novel? Does it have more than one theme? Explain.

Did you find the Christian elements in the novel realistic? Why or why not?

Read the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. How does Bentz incorporate elements of this parable into the novel? What parallels, if any, do you find?

Essay Exam Questions

*Dr. Diana Glycer, professor of English, has taught *A Son Comes Home* a number of times in her Introduction to Literature courses at Azusa Pacific University. Here are some of the essay questions she has used to test students on the book:*

1. Good authors neither spell out a specific moral nor limit themselves to just one moral in their stories. Discuss the themes in *A Son Comes Home* and two of the short stories you have read in your textbook. In each case, what are the important themes? How does the author present and develop the theme? What is the author's conviction on the theme? How do tone, character, and situation contribute to the theme?
2. Discuss how *A Son Comes Home* and two of the short stories you have read would have been different if they had used a single, totally omniscient narrator. Evaluate the author's wisdom in using participant narrators.
3. There are at least three prodigal sons who come home in this book. Name them and discuss them. Then consider: who is the real protagonist of this novel?
4. One of the most effective aspects of this book is the way that character is expressed through telling details and through speaking style. Select two characters and describe in some detail specific words, actions, possessions, choices, aspects of appearance, etc., that give the clues to their character.
5. Is *A Son Comes Home* a book written by a Christian or a Christian book? What is the difference? How would you classify the other works we have read in this class?