OLD SCHOOL

Understanding the Story

Class Picture

1. The unnamed narrator yearns for the attention of renowned writers. What does he want to get from them? (7)

2. As an editor of his school’s literary magazine, Troubadour, and a serious contender in the school’s writing contests, the narrator is especially critical of his fellow students’ literary talents. Why does he reserve his harshest criticism for Troubadour editor George Kellogg? (9-11)

3. What does the narrator mean when he proclaims about the students that “class was a fact”? What are some of the indicators he cites to discern between boys who come from old money and boys who hail from a more modest background? (15-16)

4. Why does Gershon, the school handyman, become so upset with the narrator? (17) What is the “Horst Wessel Song”? (20)

5. What do we learn about the narrator after his confrontation with Dean Makepeace? (22) Why doesn’t he reveal this fact about himself to anyone? (23)

On Fire

6. Why is smoking banned at the school? (29-30)

7. What, or who, causes the fire on campus? (33-34)

8. The narrator writes a poem for the Robert Frost contest that evokes a heroic

fireman’s disappointment as he returns to the squalor and din of his apartment the morning after a major blaze. The narrator reconsiders his choice, instead submitting his “elk-hunter” poem. Why does he do this? What doesn’t he like about his fireman poem? (36)

Frost

9. Robert Frost selects George Kellogg’s poem, “First Frost,” as the winner of the school’s literary contest. Why, then, is George so distressed? Do you think he has reason to be? Explain. (39-41)

10. Purcell and the narrator engage in a discussion about the merits of Frost’s poetry. What is Purcell’s argument against Frost’s work and the poems written in his tradition? (44)

11. The narrator refers to the “Ginsberg-Ferlinghetti crime family.” Who are they, and why does the headmaster consider them to be so threatening to literature? (46-47)

12. Mr. Ramsey asks Robert Frost if form could ever give way to “more spontaneous modes of expression, even at the cost of a certain disorder” to articulate modern consciousness. Frost retorts that it all sounds like “a grand excuse for all manner of laziness.” Do you think Mr. Ramsey has a point? Do you think a concept like “modern consciousness” gives writers permission to take a more creative approach to the tenets of good writing? Or is this an example of a generation gap? (51-53)

13. George briefly considers giving up his private meeting with Robert Frost. Based on what you know of George so far, do you think this is a gesture of honor? Or cowardice? (54-55)

14. Robert Frost tells George he is wasting his time in school and advises him to go to Kamchatka or Brazil. What do you think the poet meant to convey to the young writer? (59-60)