

JourneyForth Study Guide

This study guide is designed to help you think analytically about the content of the book. The questions that follow are open-ended, allowing you to discuss various topics and issues addressed in the novel. They cover four broad categories: character, plot, setting, and theme.

Men of Iron

by Howard Pyle

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Introduction

Henry of Lancaster (1366-1399) was a cousin of King Richard II of England. In 1386 Henry and five other noblemen, called the Lords Appellant, accused many of Richard's close friends of treason. Several of the King's friends were executed. The King, then only ten years old, swore revenge.

Eleven years later Richard carried out his threat and accused the Lords Appellant of treason. To save himself, Henry of Lancaster turned on his friends and supported the King. It was not enough to please Richard. He sent Henry into exile for ten years and seized the vast land holdings of the House of Lancaster.

Richard did not enjoy his victory over Henry for long. Trouble in Ireland forced him to lead an army there. While Richard fought in Ireland, Henry returned to England. Many nobles supported Henry because they feared that Richard might one day take their lands too. When Richard returned from Ireland, the nobles captured him, terrorized him into resigning his crown, and later imprisoned him in Pontefract Castle. Richard died there the following February in the year 1400. Henry claimed England's throne.

Though he was supported by many churchmen and nobles, Henry's succession did not bring peace to England. Robert III of Scotland refused to recognize Henry as king. Owen Glendower of Wales proclaimed himself Prince of Wales and led a rebellion against Henry. In England, some northern nobles and the Archbishop of York plotted against the king.

In 1405 Henry became ill. Contemporaries believed he suffered from leprosy although a nineteenth-century examination of Henry's physical remains showed no evidence of that disease. In 1406 the king suffered a leg injury which did not heal but instead grew worse. As a result, Henry named a Council to help him govern.

In 1408 the king suffered a seizure that left him unconscious for so long that some thought he was dead. He recovered well enough to continue his reign. During his father's illnesses, Henry's son tried to control the Council until the king removed him in 1412.

Henry IV died peacefully in March 1413. In spite of the difficulties of the last years of his reign, the kingdom was stable and the accession of his son to the throne as Henry V was peaceful.

Concerning character

1. The introduction to *Men of Iron* describes Henry IV as having “proved himself a just and merciful man ... not car[ing] to shed blood needlessly” (p. 1). Yet as the book progresses, he doesn’t appear to be just and merciful. From the book, find three or four instances of his actions that are neither just nor merciful. For example:

He is estranged from his son Henry, Prince of Wales, because he is jealous of his own heir (p. 191).

2. The Earl of Mackworth is supposed to be a good friend of Myles’s father. Yet when Myles arrives at Devlen castle, the Earl barely notices him. When told the Earl has supported him secretly, Myles responds, “Then why doth he not stand forth like a man and befriend me and my father openly, even if it be to his own peril?” (p. 62) Why has the Earl remained so secretive about his kinship with Lord Falworth? What does this reveal about the Earl’s character? How would you act if you were the Earl?
3. In chapter twenty-five, we find that the Earl of Mackworth has been carefully training Myles and arranging his knighting for an “opportunity [that] was not to be lost” (p. 155). Why do you think Myles has been trained as a knight for these three years?
4. Read pages 179–83. Myles is “marvelous changed” since he went away to France. In fact, throughout the book he grows from a boy to a man. Give several instances of Myles’s speech or actions that indicate how he has grown from child to adult. For example:

When Myles was a boy, he was brash. He rushed into any fight Blunt (or another challenger) picked with him. But when he became a man, Myles chose his battles wisely. He sought Lord Mackworth and Sir James’s advice before fighting the Sieur de la Montaigne.

5. Review chapter thirty-three. The attitudes and actions of Myles and Brookhurst during the trial by battle are very different. For example, Myles allows Brookhurst three chances to regain his stance before attacking again; but at the first chance Brookhurst gets, he takes advantage of Myles’s weakness and tramples him with his warhorse. Why do these men act the way they do? Find two other examples of conflicting attitudes and actions between Myles and the Earl and explain their motivations.

Concerning plot

6. In a literary work, the plot is the series of incidents in the story. The plot of *Men of Iron* follows Myles as he grows from squire to knight. In it he has three great fights—against Blunt, the Sieur de la Montaigne, and the Earl of Alban. Compare the three fights. For each one, list some weaknesses Myles had going into the fight and the strengths he gained coming out. For example:

In the first fight Myles’s weakness was that he was not cautious; he jumped into the fight without considering the consequences. But coming out he learned to wait until the right time and it was to his advantage to fight (p. 50).

7. At what point in the book's plot does Myles realize he must end his childish behavior and become a man?
8. There were two events follow that would "break [Myles's] boyhood in pieces" (p. 120). One is Myles's realization Lord Mackworth is "right, and [he has] been a fool" (p. 120) concerning Lady Alice; the second is his training to become a knight. Find examples from the book that explain how these two things forced him to mature.
9. A good characteristic of any plot is that the stakes against the main character build until the odds seem to be against him; this creates excitement and suspense. On page 191 the stakes are high for Myles to beat the Earl of Alban. What are some disadvantages Myles faces? Chapters twenty-nine through thirty-three record the friction between the two men. In a few sentences, tell how the stakes against Myles build the tension in the plot. For example:

Myles's youth works against him in this fight. The Earl may be older, but he is strong and more experienced in battle than Myles.
10. A climax is the moment of highest tension or emotion in a story. What do you think is the climax of *Men of Iron*? Is it the fight with the Earl of Alban, Myles's knighting by the Orders of the Bath, the visit of the King to Devlen Castle, or some other point?

Concerning setting and historical context

11. A story's setting is the where and why of the story. How would you describe the setting in which Myles lived?
12. In chapter twenty-six, review the description of the setting of Myles's first great battle against the Sieur de la Montaigne. "It was a noble day, . . . when the air seems sweeter and fresher . . . and the sun bright and as yellow as gold" (p.165) "As he looked at the restless and growing multitude, Myles felt his heart beat quickly and his flesh grow cold. . . . Sir James seemed anxious and disturbed" (p. 166). What is the atmosphere of this scene?
13. In Myles's day justice was determined by three types of trials—by oath taking, by ordeal, and by battle. In oath taking, a defendant and other witnesses swore before God and a jury that he was innocent.

In trial by ordeal, the defendant was subjected to one test or a series of tests—for example, being bound and dropped into a river. The water was blessed by a priest. If the bound person was rejected by the blessed water, he was guilty. If the accused sank, the pure water accepted him, and he was innocent. (Usually a rope was tied to the one on trial. If innocent, it was hoped he could be pulled to land before he drowned.)

Trial by battle was reserved only for nobility. The challenger and the defendant fought until death; whoever won was assumed to be right or innocent because God would aid the innocent. What do you think of these methods to determine innocence or guilt? How does our country determine guilt today?

14. Many issues of fifteenth-century England are addressed in *Men of Iron*. Two are listed below. For each one, provide examples of how the issue is presented in the book and how it is relevant today.
- God's fairness in allowing good people to come to ruin
 - Vengeance, revenge, and doing battle

Concerning theme and tone

15. A theme is an idea, concept, or message that is reinforced through the overall work. After studying pages 62, 180–181, and 218–219, what do you think is the main theme of the book?
16. List some of the wrongs needing righting by the Knights of the Rose (p. 63).
17. On pages 180-181 Prior Edward tells Myles he should not “feel bitter rancor” toward the Earl of Alban because “the worst of our enemies and the worst of men believe themselves always to have right and justice upon their side, even when they most wish evil to others.” The Earl caused his father’s blindness, took the Falworth estates and lands, and would hunt down Myles’s family until they were all dead. *Does* Myles have the right to be bitter? Find references in the Bible verse to support your answer. (see Matthew 5)
18. An issue with which Myles struggles is knowing when it is right or wrong to kill, if at all. The Prior tells him, “Thou didst not sin. It was for others thou didst fight, and for others it is pardonable to do battle. Had it been thine own quarrel, it might have been more hard to have answered” (p. 219). What do you think? “Is it always wrong for man to slay man?” (p. 218) After reading Genesis 9 and Numbers 25, support your answer with Scripture.