Socratic Seminar

**Why?** As Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Freedom of expression is essential to knowledge, and it’s time many of you started down the path toward expressing your knowledge in an appropriate way. Your teachers and I have talked at you for way too long. Now, it’s your turn to talk with each other. Take what you’ve learned and apply it.

**Topic/Focus:**

*The Things They Carried* By Tim O’Brien

Themes seen throughout the novel so far—

Truth, Mortality and Death, Social Obligation, and Memory and Storytelling

**Instructions:**

Rules:

A Socratic seminar is a discussion, not a debate. In other words, we are not looking for a winner. In a Socratic seminar, every person in the room, not speaking, is expected to listen respectfully.

***Inner Circle participants may:***

-ask for clarification if a person’s comment is confusing

-add a comment to what another person said.

-voice and opposing viewpoint.

***Everyone may not:***

-criticize anyone’s opinion, comments, or beliefs.

-interrupt someone who is speaking.

-respond in a manner that is in any way disrespectful or derogatory.

**During the class discussion:**

1) Listen to the introduction by the designated discussion leader and consider the discussion question(s) or issue(s) he or she raises.

2) Discuss (inner circle) or take notes on (outer circle) the issues raised, keeping to the subject of the readings, attempting to analyze, criticize, and connect.

a. Analyze the readings to gain a deeper understanding of difficult concepts, examples, the author's position, and the author's arguments.

b. Criticize the readings, articulating and defending personal opinions about the adequacy of the author's presentation and arguments.

c. Connect the issues you have analyzed and criticized to material of previous assignments in order to discern broader themes, similar concepts, and comparable or contrasting opinions.

3) As you participate, make good use of the text, at times calling attention to specific passages relevant to the issue at hand. When working with such a passage, cite the page number and allow time for others in the class to locate it. Then, read it aloud.

4) Ignore the teacher, who will not speak. Direct your attention to other students and regard the teacher as a recording secretary on hand to take down information for use later in the course.

5) Take brief notes of points and examples that deepen your understanding; opinions that differ from your own; and arguments that you find helpful, convincing, or worth trying to refute. These notes may be useful when you want to contribute to discussion, when you formulate study questions for subsequent classes, or when you participate in discussion. Do not, however, allow note-taking to cause you to lose the thread of the discussion.

Specific Responsibilities:

**Inner Circle—**

* You engage in discussion, actively participating but not dominating.
* You read aloud excerpts of the text to support or make a point, drawing our attention to the words the author chose to use (diction).
* Listen to each other carefully.
* Look the speaker in the eye.
* Do not interrupt.
* Use each other’s names: “What Amanda said about Steinbeck’s uses of pathetic fallacy...”
* Paraphrase what the speaker before you has said to respond responsibly. Support or refute the prior speaker’s ideas.
* Stick to the text. Your point or opinion only matters if you can support your ideas.
* If you are confused about another’s point, question her/him.
* Discuss ideas; do not attack people. It is the dialectic, the debate that makes us all more informed. Changing your mind or adding to your understanding means that your mind was open. We all win, if we learn from our discussion.

Additional consideration (in terms of grading) will go to those who assume the role of discussion leader. A leader helps to keep the discussion moving and on track. Of course, if you can contribute something useful, do so; but other kinds of comments or actions on your part can sustain the discussion just as well as an injection of insight. Here are some suggestions:

* Get students to talk to each other. Ask for a response to the most recent comments. (Anyone have a response to Clara's opinion?) Or ask a specific student to respond. (Clara, do you agree with Ralph?)
* Get students to defend or explain their opinions. (Mark, why do you say that? What's your evidence or reasoning?)
* Encourage an exploration of differing points of view. When you hear conflicting views, point them out and get the holders of those views to discuss their differences. Perhaps ask a third person to sum up the two positions.
* Keep the class on the subject. If you are even halfway familiar with the material, you know when the discussion is no longer connected to it. Just say so. (We've gotten pretty far from the readings; let's get back on the subject.) Or simply consult your list of questions. Any sensible response to one of your questions is bound to be pertinent.
* Point to a particular passage in the text relevant to a comment made by one person, or to a discussion among several. This might be a passage that challenges, or sums up and confirms, the views being expressed.
* Don't fill every silence with your own voice. Any discussion will lapse occasionally. It is not your job to avoid all silence. Some quiet periods are productive. Students who are not so quick to speak will frequently get the chance they need when others are quiet.

**Outer Circle—**

* You are silent but “talking back” by taking notes.
* When do you think the inner circle “sparked”? How did that happen?
* Track the person most directly in front of you. Did he/she contribute well (neither dominate nor duck discussion)? Explain.
* To what idea were you dying to respond? What would you have said?
* What was the single most important idea that was discussed? Why?
* What was the single most important idea that didn’t get discussed? Why?
* What could have made the discussion even more constructive?