

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Human Comedy by William Saroyan

## Book Information

William Saroyan, The Human Comedy  
Quiz Number: 16714  
Dell, 1943  
ISBN 0-440-33933-2; LCCN  
192 Pages  
Book Level: 5.8  
Interest Level: UG

This captivating novel tells the story of a gentle California community during World War II.

**Topics:** Classics, Classics (All); Emotions, Love; Family Life, Death; Family Life, Misc./Other; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Wars, World War II

## Main Characters

- Bess Macauley Homer's older sister, who is attending college
- Homer Macauley the main character of the story; he is fourteen and learns about the real world while working as a telegraph messenger
- Marcus Macauley Homer's older brother; he is away fighting in World War II
- Mary Arena Marcus's girlfriend, who is also the Macauleys' neighbor
- Matthew Macauley Homer's deceased father; he died two years prior to the story
- Miss Hicks the teacher of ancient history at Ithaca High School
- Mr. Spangler the owner of the telegraph office, who is Homer's boss
- Mrs. Macauley Homer's widowed mother; she is gentle, wise, and loves her family dearly
- Tobey George Marcus's military friend; he is an orphan who makes Ithaca his home
- Ulysses Macauley Homer's four-year-old brother, who is very curious about the world
- William Grogan the elderly telegraph operator at the office who is often drunk

## Vocabulary

- furlough** an authorized leave from work duties
- melancholy** a state of sadness
- telegraph** a once-common means of communication in which coded signals are sent electronically
- veteran** a former member of the military
- vineyard** a place where grapes are grown, generally to be used in making wine

## Synopsis

Homer Macauley is the main character in this story. He is a fourteen-year-old boy who secures a job as a messenger at a telegraph office during World War II. His father died two years earlier, and now Homer must work to take care of his family.

Homer is a determined and responsible young boy. His view about life and the world changes, however, because of his job duties. One day Homer delivers a message to a woman, informing her that her son has died in war. Homer is taken aback by the mother's reaction to the news. He begins to feel differently about things, and he begins to have doubts about the world. He feels lonely for the first time, and he questions life.

At school, Homer has a caring teacher who teaches him about life and what it means to be human. Homer enters a hurdles race, and nearly wins despite the interference of a prejudice coach. Meanwhile, the unfortunate messages of death continue to arrive at the telegraph office, and Homer struggles with his feelings about them. He begins having nightmares about the messenger of Death, who comes to his town of Ithaca. Homer realizes that he is growing up and is losing his innocent view of the world. He prays for the people of his town to be okay.

The first real glimpse of Homer's older brother, Marcus, is provided during a train scene. He and his friend, Tobey, are going into war. Tobey is an orphan who has never known a home or a real family, but through Marcus's stories of Ithaca, he believes he has found home. Marcus gives Tobey a picture of his sister, Bess, and Tobey believes he loves her.

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Meanwhile, letters arrive for the Macauleys from Marcus. In his letter to Homer, Marcus expresses that he has great confidence in his brother's ability to take care of the family.

Shortly afterward, a telegraph message arrives at the office that says Marcus has been killed in the war. Homer is stunned. He looks for someone to hate, but he does not know who the enemy is. Homer's boss assures him that his brother will always be with them. Moments later, a young man steps off a train and looks with wonder at the town of Ithaca. Tobey is finally home. He goes to the Macauleys' house, where he meets Bess and gives her a ring from her brother. Mrs. Macauley invites the young man into her home.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

Tobey is an orphan who does not know where he came from. He wonders about his heritage, and Marcus tells him, "You're an American. That's all. Any man can see that." What does Marcus mean by this?

*He means that it does not matter where Tobey comes from, he is an American. America is made up of all kinds of people from many different places. There is no need to worry about where someone is originally from; if that person is now a citizen of the United States, then he or she is American. He is sharing the ideal that America is a true melting pot, and that "This is America and the only foreigners here are those who forget that this is America."*

### Literary Analysis

What might "the Negro" on the train symbolize?

*It is likely that he represents aspects of several of the novel's themes. He represents the theme of going home because he is on a train, shouting that he is going home. He also represents the theme of Americans being a mixture of all races. Finally, he represents the ideal friendliness the author wishes were present in every human being. "The Negro" waves to Ulysses, while other people simply ignore the boy.*

### Inferential Comprehension

Mrs. Macauley comments that Mary is "a sweet, unaffected, childlike girl. She's the most childlike girl I've ever known, and I'm glad Marcus is in love with her." Why is being childlike so important to Mrs. Macauley?

*This is probably important because being childlike helps one to overcome the "loneliness" of the world that she speaks about. When people are childlike, they are innocent. This innocence allows them to be open and trusting, not cynical and jaded about the world. Mrs. Macauley knows how harsh the world can be, and she is grateful that the girl her son loves does not know the pain the world can cause.*

### Constructing Meaning

What does the book title, *The Human Comedy* mean to you?

*Because this book is not what might be ordinarily considered a comedy, this question will offer many opportunities for discussion. Therefore, students answers will vary a great deal. Their answers, however, should include something about their understanding of the characteristics of comedy and ideas about how the characters in this story may exhibit humorous traits. Students may also look at the title as symbolic or ironic.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Characterization** Have students write a short essay about their favorite character

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in this novel. Students can write a character analysis including examples from the text which support their view of the character. Also, students may explain why they chose the character they did.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Homer works at a telegraph office delivering messages for Mr. Spangler. The telegraph was a very important and efficient communication device in its time. Have students learn about the telegraph. Who invented it? How was it used?

**Understanding the Author's Craft** William Saroyan dedicated *The Human Comedy* to his mother, Takoohi Saroyan. In his dedication, he wrote that he hoped his novel would one day be translated into Armenian, which was his mother's native language. William Saroyan was born in 1908 in California to parents who emigrated from Armenia. Research the life of William Saroyan. How might his experiences have influenced his writing this novel? Are there any similarities between his real life and the lives of the characters in this story?

**Making Predictions** Unfortunately, Marcus dies in the war. His death is hard on the Macauleys because they have already lost a family member, the father. How might this novel be different if Marcus had lived? Have students write an outline or short essay predicting what might happen in the next chapter if Marcus had lived.