

The Horsecatcher by Mari Sandoz *Study Guide* *and Classroom Resources*

Major Themes & Discussion Questions

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Major Themes/Issues in The Horsecatcher

These prompts relate to the overall novel itself-and the larger issues, themes, images, symbols, concepts that emerge in the work as a whole. The goal is to help readers dig deeper in the Novel and develop more critical reading responses to the events in the narrative, and perhaps the larger issues surrounding the novel that Sandoz may have been exploring.

- The overarching theme of *The Horsecatcher* is summarized by Young Elk's father early in the narrative: "My son wishes only to catch horses, and now it seems that the only vision he has been given, the only medicine, leads to that. ... How will it be for our son when the other young men are sung into the village for their coups against the enemy, and when the women make all their trilling cries of admiration for them, while Elk must ride in unwelcomed and unseen?" Readers learn very early in the story that Young Elk dislikes to kill an animal, especially a person. Eventually, readers learn that Young Elk prefers to lead a peaceful and nonviolent life as a horse catcher, but his people believe that he is strange to want such an unglamorous life. There were several occasions that tested Young Elk's resolve not to kill that left him feeling socially awkward and shameful. Name a few times when Young Elk had to say no when they asked him to be like a warrior. Instead what alternatives did he do to help his tribe? Do you think his pacifist attitude affected the way he handled the wild horses? Or do you think it would not have mattered whether or not he liked or disliked killing? How does Elk deal with it? Does being different make him a better or worse person? How does it affect his growth as a person? At the end of the story is he content with what the horses have brought him?
- Young Elk had a great respect for life and living things. He was careful not to kill the birds for food, because they were great helpers with the horses and alerted him to dangers in the area. He would instead look for berries and older bird eggs for nourishment. But there were a few instances where he knew he had to have meat in order to have sufficient strength to do his work. How do you think his respect of life affected his success or lack of success in catching the horses? What feelings did the author describe as he killed for necessary sustenance?
- As you read this novel, you will notice that Elk has a strong connection to the things of nature in general and specifically, birds. Often times, there is a bird or birds that serve as a warning system, either to herds of horses. As you read, keep a log of the references to birds. In what circumstances do the birds show up? How does Sandoz show that Elk has a connection to the birds? How do the birds help him? Do they ever give him away to the enemy? Why do you think Sandoz choose to include them in her novel and what was her overall purpose?
- A motif is a dominant idea or central theme in literature. One motif found in Mari Sandoz's novel *The Horsecatcher* is the journey or quest. Briefly describe one of Elk's journeys in the story, and then explain its significance for Elk, as well as for his people. Where did he go, and how did he grow/change as a result of this journey? In your opinion, was the quest successful?
- Throughout the book, Young Elk tries to prove himself: to his family, to his tribe, to Old Horsecatcher and his wife, and to Red Sleeve. He was troubled because "everyone thought of him as Young Elk, the little son of the Elk." (p. 98) His own self-doubts plague him as well. In an early meeting with the Horsecatcher, he says, "I am foolish and changing as the wind. You can make nothing of such a one." (p. 53) What things does he do in an effort to prove himself "worthy"? How does he answer his own question of "...what had he to offer...?" (p. 98)
- One of the themes explored in *The Horsecatcher* is the relationship between parent and child. Young Elk has a different experience growing up than most of us. He has his blood parents, Elk River and his mother, but also has two other sets of parents, his second father and mother and Old Horsecatcher and his wife. Describe the role of each set of parents in Young Elk's development as a man and as a horsecatcher. Include in your answer some advantages and disadvantages of this system.

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- A symbol is a word or object that stands for another word or object. In this book, the White Horse becomes a symbol to Young Elk. What does it symbolize for him? What does his willingness to give up the horse in order to protect his people say about him as a person? Would you be willing to make that same sacrifice, especially when you consider that he was not always treated with respect? Why or why not? Go through the book and find another symbol (remember colors can be symbols, too). Explain what it means to Young Elk and what would have similar meaning for you in your life.
- A theme or issue prevalent in *The Horsecatcher* is that of sorrow. Throughout the book, the author mentions ways that the Cheyenne men and women mourned, and how vengeful they became once blood had been spilt. What are your thoughts on this? Why do you think, aside from what their culture demanded of them, women would gash at their arms and legs? What would you do in cases such as these presented in this book? What if it was your sibling, parent, or other relative? Would you too want revenge?
- Another issue in the book was about how Young Elk found comfort among the horses, and how this comfort brought much irritation to his parents. Think about what brings you comfort. Would you continue to find that consolation even though it anguished your parents? Why or why not? How can you relate this to Young Elk?
- If Elk had followed the desires of his father and taken the path of a warrior, do you think he would have appreciated the respect placed upon him when returning home with the scalps of those he had slain?
- Even though Elk felt guilt and shame at not being a brave warrior like his brother, do you believe his internal struggles would have been less severe if he had taken that path in life?
- The first time Young Elk slipped away from the tribe he returned very shame-faced. He had to stand before his father and the other councilors, accused of his lack of concern for the tribe. Again he left without anyone aware and joined Yellow Wolf's party. The warriors were on a horse-taking expedition, and he longed to be among the horses. Still he had displeased the Tribe. "Your younger son shames us all with his coming where he has not been asked." Young Elk would go his own way and did not share his thoughts. This theme continued throughout the book. Was Elk courageous leaving on his own? Did he follow the Cheyenne code to always "walk in honor"? On his secret departures he was only found out twice, once by his sister and again by his second mother, Horsecatcher's wife. Does he respond to these members of the tribe differently than the men who might try to stop him? Why was it so important for him to be alone in these journeys?
- One major theme of *The Horsecatcher* is the idea of identity, or being comfortable in one's own skin. Since this is an issue that adolescents deal with on a daily basis, this novel is appropriate to teach to middle or high school students. Identity is a complex issue, and one that Young Elk wrestles with throughout the novel. He wants to fit in and be recognized by his tribe, yet he also has different interests and intents than the rest of the boys his age. Young Elk's bravery in following his heart is inspiring, and is an empowering and important message for young people to see. Despite his parent's attempts to persuade Elk to be more like those around him, Elk remains true to himself and refuses to conform to the constraints of society.
- When the book first begins Young Elk often pursues his love of horse catching (or in most cases attempted horse catching). However this does not bode well with most members of the tribe. He is usually breaking rules and sneaking out in order to chase horses, and most people, especially the pretty ladies, want him to be a great warrior like his father and brother. His first big identity crisis comes when he kills the man from the other tribe that attacks Young Elk's tribe. He does not want to be a killer, and his father even acknowledges this before he kills the man, but he does it for the good of the tribe. This is partially because he was the first person to see the attackers, and it was a matter of life or death. He is treated like a hero afterwards, which makes him even less proud of what he has done.

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- Throughout the book *Young Elk* shows much compassion for all living things. Killing is just not an element of who he is, which is partly why he desires to be a horse catcher. He ends up having the dream which makes him go through the motions of becoming a horse catcher (after much deliberation and ceremony). I think the initial struggle in the first five chapters however is essential to the rest of the novel because it sets up and contrasts the person the Young Elk becomes in the latter half of the novel. Had he not going through the struggle and tribulations of shame, punishment, and even slaughter, he would not have been as strong or as sure of himself and his desire to be a horse catcher. I think Young Elk's struggle for identity was a particularly important theme of the book that helped push the narrative from beginning to end.
- In this story we find a universal theme: the conflict of following one's dream or calling versus succumbing to the expectations of others. Many young people face this challenge. Parents, families and societies often have 'expectations' for their children and attempt to manipulate them through the use of implied disappointment and emotional down grading. "He is like the pemmican before it has found its shape in the carrying bladder. Unformed," Elk River replied somberly. He has made his fasting and the dreams but it is not clear to anyone what the dreaming meant." (p 40) We can see how Elk's father, as well as the other tribal wise men, are unable to accept the path that Elk wants and is meant to take. The dream is "not clear" because it is not the dream they believed Elk should have had. He comes from a warrior family and to walk any other path is unconceivable. How many parents have forced their children into sports because they want to live through the lives of their children? How many fathers expect their sons to enter into the family business? In Indian terms, this is what was being done to Elk.
- "Looking down upon his crossed knees he had been ashamed that he was failing them all,..." (p 50) The shame that Elk experienced, for not living up to his families expectations, not becoming a brave warrior like his brother, is the same shame felt by many youth both of the past and present. Those he cares for and respects the most do not accept him for the person he is or the contributions he can make to the group. For even though he will not bring home scalps, he will furnish the herds with needed strong horses. There is so much attention paid to what he wouldn't do and not enough to what he can. Elk follows his dreams and lives his life true to himself, even though it causes him much emotional hardship. In the end he proves himself to his father and his second father when he catches and releases the Ghost stallion. Only after this great feat does his tribe realize that being a horse catcher is Elk's true calling. Again, this scenario is played out in many families not of Indian origins. The child who veers from the desires of the family has to accomplish some great feat before he is accepted and appreciated. Though the setting of this story is that of a past Indian tribe, the theme that runs through it could be applied to any culture or society even in today's modern technological society. If we want to put a moral to this story it would be something along the lines of: love and accept your children for who they are, for as long as they take the path of honesty they will make great things happen.
- The dominant element of *The Horsecatcher* is character. All other elements were skillfully addressed, and, taken together, all played an important part in the task of bringing the trials and triumphs of Young Elk to life. Character development is key in this particular story because everything revolves around who Young Elk was. There was certainly conflict in terms of what his family expected of him and what he expected of himself. I did not see the identity struggle as a dominant theme because, as I read the story, I never questioned whether he would follow his own path or follow the one that others wished for him. The theme that stood out for me involved the rewards, both tangible and intangible, one can expect by allowing the heart to lead the way through life's journey. Young Elk was admirable because in spite of ridicule, alienation at times from his loved ones, and numerous solitary struggles, he remained true to his own beliefs. He remained faithful to his values throughout, and in the end was triumphant because he was given his father's name as well as Horsecatcher's name. He was internally torn at times between what he wanted and what others expected, but in remaining true to himself, he was able to earn the respect he desired without compromising respect for himself.

Chapter by Chapter Discussion Questions.

Chapter One

- As the story opens, Young Elk is alone and seeking something, in this case, a particularly marked young colt. What insights into his character can the reader draw from this ?
- Usually horse capturing is a group effort, however Young Elk chooses to do it alone. Is he trying to prove something by doing things on his own? How so?
- How did Young Elk capture the Bear Colt? Why do you think he was so persistent in his chase of the strange-looking colt?
- What does the story about his grandmother reveal about Young Elk's family? Do you have any family stories that give insight into your values or that you use to help you make every day decisions? Explain.
- This author does a good job of using imagery. Find two incidents of description that made your eyes, ears, nose, or skin feel as if you were in the story.
- How do you think Young Elk will be treated when he reaches home with his new colt? What things in this chapter make you think so? Be specific.
- The first chapter determined Bear Colt's reputation with the tribe as a horse not worth capturing. However, through the course of the narrative the tribe starts to warm up to the strange-looking colt so that he winds up being trained as an important ceremonial horse. Do you think there are parallels between Bear Colt and Young Elk's story? Explain.

Chapter Two

- What rules or laws had Young Elk violated? How was he treated when he returned? Why was it important to the group that he obey the rules? How is the way the group enforced the laws different from how we enforce our laws? How is it the same? Which way do you think is the most effective? Why?
- What danger did Young Elk pose onto his people? Do you think that the punishment inflicted upon Young Elk was more because of this danger than because of his disobedience?
- What is significant about the fact that Young Elk seeks solace in Bear Colt after his punishment has been handed out?
- What are the ways that Young Elk and his father are alike? How are they different? Which is most important to their relationship, their similarities or their differences?
- Young Elk uses hobbles to keep his horses from moving freely. How is he "hobbled" in this chapter? Are the hobbles of his own making or do other people put them on him? Some horses learn how to move while wearing hobbles, figuring out how to move while still wearing them. Do you think he will find a way to escape from the hobbles, or do you think he will create his own way around the hobbles he wears? Why do you think so? Use specific examples from the book.
- As you read the novel, note the instances that Young Elk seeks out Bear Colt. What do you think that the colt could symbolize to Young Elk, to the people?
- During the horse raid led by Yellow Wolf, Young Elk is discovered and allowed to stay. Why did they allow Young Elk to go? Point to several reasons why the men allowed him to stay.

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Chapter Three

- In chapter 3, Young Elk has the opportunity to prove that he is brave and kills a Kiowa, which is seen as a great accomplishment by the others in the tribe. What is his new ceremonial name? How does Young Elk feel about it? What actions does he take afterwards?
- Young Elk had a different set of values. How can you relate to the difficult situation Young Elk found himself? For instance, have you ever had to break a rule because it was necessary? Describe.

Chapter Four

- In Chapter 4, what did Young Elk have to accomplish in order to not be bothered with warring anymore? How did Young Elk feel about the task? What were the dangers he faced as he did this?
- Young Elk sets out to find the golden stallion in this chapter. At this point in your reading, how do you think he would feel if he did catch it? How would he feel if he did not? What goals in your life can you relate to with the impossible task he had to face and the determination it took to overcome?
- Family dynamics are explored somewhat in this chapter. How does the structure of Young Elk's family differ from the modern family?
- How are gender roles different in the Cheyenne society? What are some reasons why Young Elk cannot directly talk to his mother and sisters besides the one given?
- What is the point of a second family? Is it better to support a stronger community or a stronger family in this society? Why?

Chapter Five

- When Elk went to bury his brother, Two Wolves, only bones were left at the battle site. How did he know which bones were his brother's?
- What factors really caused the Bowstrings to die in such a disastrous way? Please review each factor put forth in the chapter and either support it as a cause or refute it.
- In this chapter Young Elk describes the arrival of some young Sioux. He says, "They had been south to see a little of the world as was good before a man settles to village life." What other cultures send their young out into the world to explore before settling down? What benefit do you think this has to the individual and to the society?

Chapter Six

- Explain the foremost duty of the Arrow Keeper's wife. Why is this duty of such importance to the entire tribe?
- When Elk is captured by the Comanche he uses two items to help him escape. What are these two items? Which came from his "dreaming" and what is its significance?

Chapter Seven

- In Chapter 7 Elk "was a little better prepared to go far from home this time." In what ways is he better prepared emotionally? How about physically? And what does Horsecatcher mean when he says, "You will need very strong medicine to make a returning"?

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Chapter Eight

- The focal point of Chapter 8 is Sandoz's description of the battle between the stallions. How does her diction, syntax, and imagery create an accurate depiction of the violence in nature? What is Elk's reaction to what he witnesses?
- At the end of the chapter, Elk fears that more violence has occurred. "For a moment his heart seemed to stop, and guilt flooded over him." Explain.

Chapter Nine

- In Chapter 9 we join Young Elk in his adventure to bring home his first herd of horses. As Young Elk struggles to tame the dun and find a way to capture the other horses, he has a memory. "He remembered that the Horsecatcher said that there were things Elk must work out for himself." What plan does Young Elk devise for catching the horses?
- As Young Elk faces his problems with the horses he wishes for guidance. "He wished Horsecatcher could be here to say what must be done." What lessons did Young Elk learn from the Horsecatcher that helped him trap and care for the horses?
- The images of his return to the village that Young Elk imagines help foreshadow his return. What do you predict will happen in the next chapter after reading these thoughts?

Chapter Ten

- In Chapter 10 we share Young Elk's triumph as his plan to capture the small herd of horses ends in success. Young Elk feels very lucky as he reflects on his adventure. "Not the stallion fight, the rattlesnake, or the Kiowas had touched him." Describe one of these encounters and explain in what way Young Elk used his wits and his bravery to survive. What lesson did Young Elk learn about himself during the encounter you chose?
- Young Elk has captured two stallions on this trip, the blue and the dun. What are some characteristics of each of these horses that make them so desirable? Will Young Elk keep them for his own use, to build his herd? How will these horses contribute to his status as a horsecatcher for his tribe?
- "Elk's uncle, Owl of the Bowstrings, made a little speech. "Perhaps our son should start a new society, the Horsecatchers!" he said, laughing a little. Imagine that there really is such a society. Create a list of rules for admittance to this society based on what you have learned while reading *The Horsecatcher*. Who would you nominate to be a member? Why would they be selected? What things do you think might be forbidden to the horsecatchers?

Chapter Eleven

- For what reason did Horsecatcher refuse the bay mare that Young Elk presents to him? Why did this refusal embarrass Young Elk?
- Why did Young Elk feel more at ease at Horsecatcher's lodge than he did at the scalp dance? What does this say about Young Elk and his sense of belonging?
- Why did Young Elk journey to the land of the Northern Cheyenne?
- How does Elk struggle in this chapter with what he believes about who he is and the outside pressure from his father and his brother's memory?

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Chapter Eleven

- The circle is an archetype or symbol often seen in Native American Literature. In this chapter we see this archetype in relation to a Elk's reflections on his relationship with the earth. Explain.
- What examples do we see of cultural diversity from tribe to tribe in this chapter?

Chapter Twelve

- Why is the story of Young Elk killing a Kiowa brought up right away to the Northern Cheyenne warriors? How does Young Elk feel about the killing, and how is that different than how the warriors feel about it?
- Soon after arriving among the Northern Cheyenne, Young Elk is asked to join a war party attack against the Crow. He awkwardly refuses, but then feels bad for doing so. In an effort to comfort him, Horsecatcher's sister says, "Do not let your heart be on the ground, my nephew. You have selected the harder road." What does she mean by these lines? Do you think they were helpful to Young Elk?
- What assumptions are spoken about Young Elk after he refuses to join the war party? Think to the buffalo butchering party.
- Did Young Elk enjoy his time with the Northern Cheyenne? Provide evidence from the text to support your answer.
- Elk's visit to the Northern Cheyenne is a learning experience; what were some things that he learns during his time with his northern relatives?
- Compare the horse-catching scene in this chapter with the horse-catching scenes of chapters 8,9, and 10. How has Young Elk progressed in his profession and how has he changed?

Chapter Thirteen

- When Elk returns from the North, how is he treated with respect? How does this contrast with the same respect given to a returning warrior?
- Why do you think Elk only tells Horsecatcher's wife where he is going?
- The Cheyenne and the Comanche are sworn enemies, but Young Elk wants to see if the tales of the Two Sisters are true or not. How does Young Elk manage to accomplish getting into Comanche territory to watch the Two Sisters?
- How does Elk show courage and intelligence in order to gain a place amongst the Comanche?
- The Two Sisters wanted to do everything together as well as having the same identical things. Name at least three of the Sister's wishes.
- Why was Young Elk so impressed with the Two Sister's horse catching skills? What does Elk admire about the sisters?

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Chapter Fourteen

- Why does Elk choose not to tell the Comanche sisters about Bear Colt and the Pelousy horse? Do you think this is a wise decision? Why or why not?
- Why are the girls so interested in Elk? How does he respond to this attention?
- Why do you think the Comanche men suddenly decided to attack Elk? How did they know that he was Cheyenne?
- Elk's idea to visit the Comanche camp is similar to a foreign exchange student coming from another country to study at our school. Compare and contrast the way that Elk is treated in the camp with the way foreign exchange students are treated.
- When Elk is hiding in the desert, what are some methods he uses to try to get water?
- How does Elk kill the buffalo calf? What does he use the calf for?
- Elk demonstrates his appreciation and kind-heart towards animals numerous times throughout the book. Give two specific examples of this kindness from chapters 14 and 15.

Chapter Fifteen

- What challenges does Young Elk face on his final horse raid?
- How does Elk capture and tame the White Horse?
- Why doesn't Elk make it back to camp with the White Horse?
- When Young Elk returns from his final horse raid, he returns to Bear Colt for comfort. Why do you think he does this?
- At the end of the story, Elk is given a new name. What is this name, and why is it significant?
- Even though Young Elk does not return with his full catch of ponies, he still has a sense of pride at the end of the novel. What is the source of this pride and how do the Cheyenne react at end of the novel?
- What do you think happens to Elk after the story ends? Write an afterward for the book, where you summarize Elk's life as an adult.