The Killer Angels
Michael Shaara

Summary
This book chronicles the story of the Battle of Gettysburg. The book opens on June 29, 1863. It is the third year of the Civil War. So far, the South has been extremely successful. The North, on the other hand, has struggled with leadership—they’ve changed between generals over and over again. The Confederate and Union armies end up in close proximity to one another near the town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and because an overeager Confederate commander fails to follow orders, the South attacks the North. The South successfully takes the town of Gettysburg, but fails to secure good ground for the battle the following day. The North gains a defensible position in front of and around a hill overlooking the town, Little Round Top. Two days of battle ensue, and after the bloodiest battle in the Civil War, the South is forced to retreat.

Organizational Patterns
The Killer Angels is first broken into four days: June 29, 1863, just before the battle began; July 1, 1863, the day of the initial Confederate attack; July 2, 1863, the first full day of battle; and July 3, 1863, the final day of battle. Within those four sections are chapters, each chapter written from a different point of view. Most of the chapters are written from the viewpoints of key leaders in the battle, such as Confederate General Robert E. Lee and Union Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain.

The Enduring Issues
War
Are the causes for which we fight in war really worth the lives that are lost?
The Civil War’s casualties add up to more than U.S. casualties in any war fought since: over 600,000 people died. Throughout the novel, leaders question whether the loss of their soldiers’ lives is worth the causes for which they are fighting. As Lee says, “We are never prepared for so many to die. . . . We expect some chosen few. . . Victory celebrations for most of us, a hallowed death for a
few. But the war goes on. And the men die. The price gets ever higher” (Shaara 192). Sometimes in the novel it seems like the price is too high.

Which is more important: loyalty to beliefs or loyalty to family and friends?
Many characters in the novel feel conflicted about their place in the Civil War. For example, Lee doesn’t necessarily agree with the South’s secession, but he is so unflinchingly loyal to Virginia that he feels he has no choice but to lead the Confederate army. Lo Armistead and Win Hancock were inseparably close friends before the war, but now they fight for opposite sides. And in some cases, even brothers fight on opposite sides of the line.

**Relationships**

What makes a good leader?
The importance of leadership is at the forefront of this novel. Readers are presented by Shaara, for the most part, with the most heroic leaders involved in Gettysburg. As Lee and Chamberlain galvanize their troops to brave terrifyingly dangerous circumstances, one has to wonder what it is about these men that allows them to so inspire those under their command.

How do difficult, even traumatic experiences, affect the relationships of people that go through them together?
Oftentimes, despite the difficulty and horror of war, the characters in the novel reflect on how much they will miss the camaraderie of wartime. Several extremely close friendships blossom—especially the friendship between Longstreet and Lee.

**Issues Related to the Study of Literature**

**Themes**

Difficult experiences bring us closer together.
One of the major themes of the novel is how strong friendships become when people go through very challenging circumstances together. The soldiers who go through difficult battles, and the generals who work together through great diversity, come to be linked by an almost mystical bond. War fosters an unbreakable brotherhood.

Pride can cause us to make irrational decisions.
A major cause of the South’s loss at Gettysburg was the South’s pride. Although General Longstreet continually urges him to fight a defensive battle, General Lee cannot bear to be ridiculed for his lack of action. He encourages his men to attack although they are not in an advantageous position. There are several other instances in the novel when the issue of Southern pride is brought up; ultimately, it can even be argued the whole war was fought because the South’s pride was insulted.

In the end, you can never force a man to fight: you must inspire him to fight.

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The two of the most commendable leaders in this novel, Lee and Chamberlain, are continually presented as leading their men not through compulsion but through inspiration. In a particularly poignant scene, Chamberlain addresses a group of men who have decided to mutiny because they do not feel any loyalty to the Union army as a whole—only to their Maine regiment. Chamberlain has been told he can shoot the deserters, but instead he inspires them with a moving speech about freedom and how much the Union Army needs them. All but six of the men decide to fight, and later even more of them join.

**Setting**
The setting is essential to an understanding of this novel. The Battle of Gettysburg will need to be contextualized historically, so the temporal setting is important. The cultural setting will be important as well; students must understand the traditional characteristics of the South that are so prominent in the book, as well as theAlso, the physical setting is very important in that if the students do not understand the geographical layout of the battle, much of the story will be lost to them. Most printings of the novel should have maps of army positions; these maps will need to be focused on in class so that students do not simply skip over them.

**Point of View**
Point of view is an essential literary element for understanding this novel. The point of view shifts in every section, allowing the reader to jump around to all of the various troops that were key players in the Battle of Gettysburg. Other than simply being a great device for pulling the plot forward, this shifting point of view is key to characterization.

**Characterization**
This novel is largely a study in the characters of some of the most fascinating figures of the Battle of Gettysburg. Also, one of the most difficult tasks in reading this novel will to keep all of the numerous characters straight, so Shaara’s vivid portrayal of the characters is essential.

As Shaara points out in his introduction, these are his interpretations of the characters, although he used a great deal of research to help himself round them out. One of his greatest achievements is making iconic, legendary figures like Lee into fully rounded human beings, with weakness and foibles just like everyone else.

**Direct Characterization**
Shaara often utilizes direct characterization when he first introduces his characters, possibly to help the reader gain a mental hold on who that character is since there are so many. He always

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describes the character’s physical appearance and usually some of their most distinguishing personality traits.

**Indirect Characterization**
Shaara utilizes three forms of indirect characterization. First, he uses the characters’ actions. Lee, for example, restrains himself from chastising the generals who choose to ignore his orders, even when their choices have put the entire army in jeopardy. This shows remarkable self-restraint and capacity for leadership.

Second, Shaara uses the characters’ thoughts. This is probably his most extensive form of characterization, and the most fascinating. This is also where Shaara does the most interpretation of characters; after all, nobody really knows what Lee was thinking throughout Gettysburg.

Third, Shaara uses the characters’ thoughts about one another. This is one of the ways he brings the poignant friendships between characters to the forefront. Many of the men’s thoughts show how deeply they care about one another and how much their friendships with others mean to them.

**Conflict**
Of course, in a war novel conflict is an important literary element. However, some of the novel’s most epic battles actually take place within the characters’ minds.

**External Conflict**
The conflict of battle is at the forefront of this novel. The entire story hinges upon the battle between the Confederate and Union troops, and the strategic decisions that the leaders make. Chance and mishaps come to play a great role in this conflict.

**Internal Conflict**
Although the physical battle of the war is significant, some of the key conflicts in the novel take place within the characters’ minds. Lee and Longstreet face the conflict of caring very much for their troops, but knowing that they must lay their lives on the line in battle, without holding back, if they are to be successful in the war. Many leaders have to make important decisions in the heat of battle, as alternative choices battle within their minds.

**Affective Issues**
Students may have a difficult time relating to the characters—particularly girls, because none of the characters are male. Other issues could be that these characters are adults, and that they lived in a time far removed from our own. Also, the characters are presented as slightly grandiose; there is distance between the heroes and the everyday person. It will thus be very important for the teacher to make an effort to help students connect to the novel personally.

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Students will best be able to become emotionally involved in the novel if they come to care about the characters. Shaara’s effective characterization should be able to help make this happen. Students will probably also be able to become personally involved in the story if they feel a sense of suspense, and Shaara certainly uses suspense effectively.

Students will also relate well to the novel’s thematic statements about families and relationships, and how those relationships can conflict with beliefs. If we were to have a class discussion about whether students would choose belief or family and friends, students will doubtless all have a lot to say.

This novel could be emotionally disturbing because it includes the gruesome sights and sounds of war, and the horror of watching others die. Particularly sensitive students may need to be advised to skip over some passages, but the disturbing imagery is certainly not sensational or gratuitous.

**Vocabulary Issues**

The most prominent type of vocabulary that may prove challenging for students is that of military terminology. For example, to understand the novel students will need to learn what a regiment and brigade are, what infantry and cavalry are, and what a bayonet and artillery are.

This book is replete with examples of effective writing. Shaara shifts between beautifully descriptive passages and terse, stream-of-consciousness narratives of battle scenes. This book is a perfect way to demonstrate that different writing styles achieve different effects. Shaara is a master of using language effectively for his purpose.

**Background Knowledge**

An enormous amount of background knowledge will be necessary for understanding of this novel. Most prominently, students will need to know what has occurred in the Civil War up to the point of the Battle of Gettysburg. In addition to needing a background of the war in order to understand the context of the novel, students will need this background in order to understand the many references to earlier events in the war in the novel. Particularly, the book often refers to former Union generals, the legendary Stonewall Jackson, and former battles like Chancellorsville and Fredericksburg.

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There are also multiple allusions to other texts like Shakespeare and the Bible, to significant contemporary thinkers like Charles Darwin, and to military traditions like Taps. These allusions will probably be best taught as they come up in the novel.

**Implications for Students of Diversity**

It will be important to address questions of race in the novel with a great deal of sensitivity. First of all, African American students may feel uncomfortable when we discuss the issue of slavery. Even more sensitive, though, will be the description of the runaway black slave that Chamberlain encounters. Chamberlain has an unwanted ambivalent reaction to the black man; he even feels revulsion when he looks at this man’s thicker lips and dark skin. He has to question whether this is a human, after all. This will definitely cause discomfort for African American students unless handled very carefully.

It will thus be important to find a way to honor students of African American heritage. I think this can be done effectively by focusing on the fact that many of the Union soldiers were fighting because of their conviction that black people were human. Students can celebrate together that slavery ended and that African Americans have achieved great things in this country.

**Gender Issues**

This novel does not directly address any gender issues. However, female students may resent the lack of female characters; there simply is not a single woman in the novel who is actually a rounded character. Some of the men even speak of women in a deprecatory manner. Students will need to hear that this was the attitude of society at the time, not an attitude that the author or the teacher necessarily endorse.

**Research Issues/Project Ideas**

**Background Research Projects**

One effective way of helping students to gain the vast amount of background knowledge essential to understanding this novel could be to assign students individual reports on aspects of the war or outside texts that the students will need to be familiar with in order to make connections with the text. For example, one student could be assigned to researching Stonewall Jackson, another to researching Darwin’s theory of evolution, and so on. Other students could research what happened after the Battle of Gettysburg, through the end of the war and on to Reconstruction, to allow students to really contextualize what they learn about the war in the novel.

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Character Analysis
Another meaningful project would be an in-depth character analysis. Since there are so many characters in the novel, having the students focus on just one character could allow them to become experts on that character to help the class.

Timeline
This novel is a complex series of events that can be difficult to keep track of and synthesize into a coherent story line. As a project, students could create a timeline of the events in the novel to allow them to keep track of and connect the events.

Quotebook
Students could choose one of the enduring questions or themes that we will discuss in class and find all of the quotes that relate to that question, then compile those quotes into a quote book.

Civil War Forum
Students could be assigned characters that represent the different viewpoints of those fighting in the Battle of Gettysburg; important points to focus on will be the characters’ attitudes toward war and motivation for fighting. Students, acting as these characters, could hold a debate in which they try to convince each other that their attitudes are correct. Or more simply, one half of the class could represent the South and the other half the North.

Letter Home/Journal Entry
Students could write letters home or journal entries from the perspective of several of the novel’s characters.

Movie Poster
Using artwork to present significant scenes in the novel and significant quotes from the novel, students could create a poster for the movie version of the novel.

Audiovisual Presentation
Using music, photography, and quotes, students could create an audiovisual presentation to represent the novel.

Enrichment Resources
Civil War Photography
The civil war was the first American conflict during which photography had been developed. Students can view civil war photos at
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/cwphtml/cwphome.html
http://www.civilwarphotos.net/
http://www.archives.gov/research/civil-war/photos/

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Ambrose Bierce’s short story *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* is a wonderful piece of Civil War fiction that students may have read in the past or that can supplement students’ reading of *The Killer Angels*.

**Michael Shaara**
Students can learn more about the author of the novel at

http://www.jeffshaara.com/michaelbio.html

**Gettysburg**
The 1993 film version of the novel could be a great resource for teaching this book. The film is only rated PG.