

Plot Summary

Growing up in an intimately small Oklahoma town, Jim Charlton and Pud (the first-person narrator) liked to confide in each other and philosophize “like two prophets from the Bible.” Now in high school, Jim and Pud find very little stimulation or nourishment for their dreams in sleepy Fleamont (pop. 200), where the only point of interest is a 400-foot “mound” called Mt. Flea. Pud seems resigned to the monotony of his days, but Jim longs for excitement, recognition, and, above all, personal acclaim. Hoping to become an overnight celebrity, he decides to stage a publicity stunt of Mike Mulligan proportions. Jim arrives at the Fourth of July celebration all dressed up and posts a billboard promising “The once-in-a-lifetime extravaganza affair.” His public announcement draws titters: He will single-handedly dig through Mt. Flea, from one side to the other, in a single day—before the sunrise of July 5. Picnickers gather to watch, but most go home during the night. Pud visits Jim inside his hole, finding him in pain and tears but still digging like a terrier. Pud’s offer of help is declined, as that would be cheating. Jim bursts through—and collapses—just slightly *after* the sunrise of July fifth. Though he fails to meet his deadline, the media take a fleeting interest in him and, for a few weeks, he is a hero. The experience, Pud notes, somehow helps both of them to mature.

Interpreting the Story: Focus on Characterization

Jim Charlton presents a fascinatingly complex character for study. For all the description offered by the narrator, however, Jim may yet remain an enigma—a character who doesn’t quite “add up.” The following ideas for discussion may be combined with the **Student’s Page** activity and the **Responding Creatively** activity to spark the beginnings of an original story or psychological profile.

1. Ask your students to jot down or underline words that describe or imply something about Jim’s personality. If desired, they may place a check mark after any descriptions that do not seem clear or consistent (“Jim left a long shadow”; his “bronzed words”) for further discussion. Students should attempt to describe Jim in words that are more easily understood.
2. Ask your students to also find incidents and dialogue that reveal something about Jim’s character. That he is “ambitious” and a “go-getter” is immediately apparent. But what is seen or suggested about him on a *deeper* level as the story progresses?
3. Discuss the nature of Jim’s ambition. Is he obsessed? Why might he be trying so hard to prove himself, and what exactly is he trying to prove? Do you think he’s chosen an effective way to go about it?
4. Pick out and examine a few dialectic regionalisms—colloquial expressions and speaking styles of Jim’s particular time (’50s?) and place. Is it possible that the laid-back values/lifestyle behind this folksy way of talking have somehow added fuel to Jim’s “fire”?

Responding Creatively to the Story

Ideas generated in the section above may be helpful in this activity. Imagine: Instead of honors, Jim’s erratic post-dig behavior has earned him a psychiatric evaluation at the Fleamont Institute for Living. Jim expresses only pessimism about his future, muttering, “I’ll never amount to anything!” over and over. To help him better understand his motives and goals, the doctors urge him to release his feelings in drawings. Students who are artistically inclined may help Jim express himself by sketching something important in his world. Scenes from the dig may be especially cathartic. Students interested in probing (*and creating!*) Jim’s psyche may perform in a psychodrama, with one student playing Jim and all others acting as members of the medical team.



Connecting with Cultural Values and Students' Lives

Jim Charlton did not, in his own eyes, “measure up.” He had to be bigger, better, stronger, more determined, more daring—in a word, he had to be MORE! Bigger than life! He could not, in the words of TV’s Fred Rogers, like himself “just the way he was.” And he never explained, either to himself or others, the true driving force behind that “winner takes all” imperative. Like Jim, most people would like to shine in some way, but unlike Jim, not all insist on being brightest. These questions will help lead your students to a sharper understanding of Jim’s driving forces.

1. Jim was not so much responding to peer pressures or parental expectations as he was to his own, frantically pounding inner drummer. Do you think that a person’s inner drives can, like peer pressure, get out of control and lead one to foolish or dangerous extremes? What are your own experiences of peer and inner pressures to be good at certain things, or to behave and/or look in a way that is socially sanctioned?
2. What would you say is the difference, if any, between ambitiously meeting challenges on the one hand, and striving to be the very best in your class/field/social group on the other? Does the latter necessarily include single-mindedness, obsession, ruthlessness (toward self or others), and/or the neglect of other areas in one’s life? Have you ever tried to top everyone in some area or undertaking? If so, what happened? Was something gained and/or lost?
3. How do you interpret Mr. Rogers’s immortal words, “I like you just the way you are!”?
4. Consider and discuss the statement “What the mind can conceive, one can achieve.”

Name _____ Date _____

Before You Read: Take Five!

In the spaces below, list **five personal goals** that you would be most happy to achieve and that you believe are important to leading a successful life. You might list such treasures as glowing health, happy marriage or other love relationship, professional attainments (be specific), etc. Beside these goals, identify **five doable actions** you could take, or attitudes you might adopt, that would put you on course for the realization of your dreams.

- 1. _____

- 2. _____

- 3. _____

- 4. _____

- 5. _____

Name _____ Date _____

Vocabulary from “Prophets”

Directions: Based on the way each word in bold below is used in the sentence, **write** what you think the word means. Then **look up** the same word in your dictionary and copy the definition that comes closest to the way the word is used in the sentence. Finally, **write a sentence** of your own using the word. Make sure the sentence shows what the word means. Use a separate sheet of paper.

Example: “I don’t mind it a bit,” said Katy **resolutely**, as she clasped his hands in hers. (p. 26)

Definition based on context: *with determination, firmness*

Dictionary definition: *firm or determined; unwavering (American Heritage Dictionary, 1992)*

Original sentence: *Mrs. Peabody moved resolutely to the witness stand, determined to tell the truth.*

1. I had lost all interest in listening to the old **oracle** speak the ways of life. (p. 129)
2. It was two days earlier that Jim had told me of his **venture**. (p. 129)
3. **Discreetly**, I glanced back at him. (p. 130)
4. I could always tell when Jim was really upset because he’d try to talk like Mrs. Buecher, our English teacher, by using these big, **highfalutin** words and phrases. (p. 130)
5. “Yeah, well, now you got me all **flabbergasted!**” (p. 131) (Note: The speaker is using the word incorrectly!)
6. As the dry, **arctic** air hit me, the change in temperature made my skin feel like it was going to crack. (p. 132)
7. Jim wore painted red boots, green plaid slacks, a **magenta** shirt, and a black engineer’s cap. (p. 134)
8. There was a moment of silence, which was met by roaring laughter that spread like **smallpox** through the crowd. (p. 134)
9. The next few hours I sat alone at the base of Mt. Flea beneath an old, **decrepit**-looking oak tree. (p. 136)
10. His weak body turned toward me and gained an inch of posture as he smiled in pitiful **appeasement**. (p. 137)

Name _____ Date _____

Reading Check for "Prophets"

Circle the letters of all correct answers. Some questions may have more than one correct answer.

- The story is titled "Prophets" because
 - Jim and Pud sometimes spoke seriously, like biblical prophets
 - Jim and Pud were influenced by the Bible
 - Jim and Pud tried to look into the future
 - it pokes pun-fun at clergymen who are after "profits"
 - the townspeople are know-it-alls
- Jim and Pud are friends because
 - they share the same religious beliefs
 - both are social outcasts
 - the author thought they'd go well together
 - Jim is inspired by Pud's creativity
 - they share a common goal
- The narrator is named
 - Jim
 - Mrs. Buecher
 - Ishmael
 - Pud
 - Grandpa
- Mt. Flea is
 - flea-high
 - 400 feet high
 - popular with hikers
 - more of a mound
 - the town's best-kept secret
- Jim Charlton draws inspiration from
 - his maw
 - the Bible
 - within
 - Mike Mulligan & Mary Anne
 - Bubba

Language Study: Pardon My Malapropism!

Jim Charlton's lofty aspirations sometimes prompt him to overreach his verbal capacities when he misuses words that he thinks will sound impressive. The narrator's words and logic are not always on the money, either! You may enjoy playing critic by following these steps and responding on a separate piece of paper:

- Locate three or more malapropisms** (words used wrongly), or even words that seem slightly off target.
- Try to understand the root of the speaker's confusion—why he thinks his word is appropriate. Is his weak or wrong word somehow related to one that would better serve?
- Suggest a word or words closer to the speaker's intended meaning.

Example #1: Jim was a tall fellow, but not too overpowering. (p. 129)

Source of confusion: Overpowering has to do with being forceful, which Jim surely is, though not obviously so. Height is not immediately associated with force. Also, "too overpowering" is a redundancy.

Better word: Imposing

Example #2: "Yeah, well now you got me all flabbergasted!" (p. 131)

Source of confusion: If one is so much astonished as to be flabbergasted, it could also include some lack of control.

Better word: Flustered