

Discussion Question Notes for Evaluation: Ender's Game

Questions to Think About as You Read

What are the science fictional elements of this novel? Why is it categorized as science fiction?

Ender's Game deals with a response to an ongoing war with an alien race. Because of the distances involved and limitations on space travel, Earth has a few years to train a new commander in the war. Much of the story takes place in an orbital space station that is the location of the Battle School, complete with null-gravity battle-practice rooms. There is a worldwide "net" clearly modeled on the Internet, which existed in a form considerably less widespread and more primitive than today in 1985, and Ender himself is the product of genetic experimentation. *Ender's Game* is more a science fictional novel than not.

What is the dialogue opening each chapter? Who are these people and why are they discussing Ender? Does their relationship change during the story?

Most of the dialogue is between Graff and Anderson, who argue about Ender's status, what they're doing to him, and Graff's training methods. Graff is often called upon to justify his methods, and in the end, his justification is successful.

What is the state of religion in this society? Why does it matter to the story? What impact does it have on the ending?

Both of Ender's parents come from religions where having children is encouraged; his father has a Catholic upbringing, his mother a Mormon one. This is described as having an impact on their decision to have a third child in noncompliance with the law, although this is in fact encouraged in their case because the government is trying to create a perfect commander, and Ender's two older siblings are unsuitable. There are other references to religion in the story; some of Ender's classmates are Jewish, and one is Muslim. None of these seem to have any effect on the story as a whole, however, unlike at the end of the story where Ender adopts his new title of Speaker for the Dead. He seems to do this as an atonement for his actions against the buggers, but it becomes a religious practice in his colony. This sets up the sequel to *Ender's Game*, *Speaker for the Dead*, but Card seems to be making a point about the religious impulse and why people might need religion. Ender isn't officially condemned by anyone, but he still blames himself for the xenocide of the buggers.

What does it say about Ender that he consistently finds the flaw in his commanders' strategies?

It speaks to his suitability for command that, throughout the story, he is consistently able to adapt to flaws in the strategies of others, particularly in those used against him. Later in the novel there is much comment on the adaptability of the buggers to strategies used

against them, and it's finally admitted to Ender that his ability to think like the buggers is one of the characteristics his superiors were looking for.

What can you tell about this society based on the fact that it has produced a place like the Battle School?

Readers will probably draw a number of conclusions, but the different perspective on children is a big one. It isn't just that Ender is an exceptional child (although he is); the idea of training children for war is a pretty novel one to modern society (even though, historically, it's not that unusual) and says something about how humanity views the threat of the buggers.

Why is this novel titled Ender's Game?

There's the obvious presence of games (battle training games, the game Ender plays on his desk, and so on), but at a deeper level, the structure of the novel like a game (Ender keeps passing greater and greater tests, moving on to the next level) and the personal importance of his desk game, as well as the fact that he's playing a game devised by his superiors that he doesn't really know about until he discovers that it's real, are all things that can be touched on in discussion of this question.

Is Ender a hero?

Card makes this subjective, and readers probably will too. The question can provide a starting point to discuss what heroism really means, and what makes a person a hero. Card also leaves open the question of whether the entire war could have been avoided, which is another good basis for discussion.

This book was published in 1985. It predicts the spread of what technology-based phenomenon? Have things worked out as it predicted?

Card was most likely aware of the Internet in 1985, even though it hadn't achieved the volume or ubiquity of the net today. Among other things, Locke and Demosthenes probably wouldn't be able to keep their identities hidden for so long if the net in *Ender's Game* was more like ours. The role of the net is also somewhat different in the story, with not as much overlap between net personalities, scholarship, and government as is implied in *Ender's Game*. In 1985 the Internet was still mostly used by educational institutions and the government, and recreational use by people unaffiliated with one or the other was comparatively rare.

Why do Ender's friendships fade as his authority grows?

Card suggests more than once that this is a price of leadership. Ender's growing distance from his friends also suggests the distance between him and Graff and Mazer, who care about him but do not allow themselves to show it.

Questions by Chapter

Chapters 1-3

What does the monitor do? Would Ender have taken the same action to defend himself in chapter 1 if he'd still had it?

The monitor allows observation from the inside, so to speak; Ender's observers (unnamed at this point) say that they see through his eyes and hear through his ears. Stilson also indicates that the lack of the monitor means that Ender has lost his protection. The dialogue that opens the chapter implies that the speakers know that the fight will result; the "surrounding with enemies" happens almost immediately.

Why does Ender think that he is "just like Peter"?

Ender thinks of his brother as violent, and more than that, cruel. Ender supposedly has his brother's capacity for violence and his sister's capacity for compassion, but clearly being like his brother bothers him more.

Why is Peter jealous of Ender?

Peter obviously wants to be the one chosen. This has important implications later in the story as Peter begins seeking power.

Why is Ender's being a Third considered negative? What does this tell you about society on Earth?

Earth only permits two children per family as a population control measure, indicating that the planet is overpopulated. This provides an impetus for Earth colonies, as a way of reducing population pressure and giving third, fourth, etc. children a future.

Why is Ender suited to be an officer?

Graff tells him that they're hoping he's a combination of Peter and Valentine, but it also has to do with how he beat Stilson. Ender says "Knocking him down won the first fight. I wanted to win all the next ones, too." This signifies that he plans for the future, the way an officer needs to.

Chapters 4-6

Ender is not an ordinary six-year-old. What's different about him? Is everyone's Battle School experience like his?

By this point in the story, the very real ways in which Ender is different should be apparent to most readers; his unusual intelligence and ability to plan seem to belong to a much older person. Plus, of course, Graff is tailoring him for something specific. This

question can be a jumping-off point to discussing what Card seems to be saying about childhood.

Why does Ender like Graff at first? Why does Graff single him out?

Unlike the “monitor lady” in chapter 1, Graff warns him about pain, which makes Ender more inclined to believe his friendliness. Graff singles him out because he has plans for Ender, obviously, but everyone else dislikes Ender as a result. Graff seems to be doing that deliberately as well, as part of his “surround him with enemies” plan.

Why is Ender so isolated? Is it all due to Graff? What is planned for him?

This is a somewhat subjective question, but from the early chapters we see that Ender is pretty good at isolating himself. Graff does encourage the tendency by making it very difficult for him to make friends, however.

Why does Ender think that the security system on his desk is deliberately easy to break?

Because Ender, a six-year-old, broke it. Of course, Ender is no ordinary six-year-old.

What are the buggers? What do you know about them at this point in the story?

Card is very coy about revealing information about the buggers. Readers familiar with British slang will probably giggle over the name. The implication is that they look like insects, and somebody punned on “bug”. Graff indicates that the buggers are more than willing to wipe out the human race, but in these chapters we also learn that Graff doesn’t always tell the truth...

Why does Ender keep trying to get past the Giant’s Drink in his game?

It’s never made explicitly clear why Ender is so determined to get past that point, although it could reflect his determination to get past other obstacles at the Battle School. His teachers remark on the game and his insistence on playing it. Most readers will have their own opinions on this one.

Chapters 7-9

Why does Ender get transferred when he does?

He’s gotten too stable and comfortable where he is, so his commanders move him on. (Arguably, he’s also learned all he can in his current position.)

If Ender has never “just lived,” why does he want to? How do you suppose he knows what that is?

His idea of “just living” comes from his game, where he sees people doing just that. In a way, the colony at the end of the novel could be interpreted as a realization of that idea, although Ender himself doesn’t get to take permanent advantage of it. He does think to himself that he has no idea what it is, since he has never done it, but he has the idea that it doesn’t involve killing or being killed.

How and why does Ender disobey Bonzo’s orders in the battleroom? What important discovery does he make?

Ender realizes that by re-orienting his body, he makes a smaller target and one that isn’t completely immobilized if he’s shot. This becomes an important part of his strategy later in the story.

Read the conversation between Ender and Dink on pp. 120-121. What do you think of Dink’s point of view? Do you think he’s right?

Subjective. Dink believes that the buggers aren’t a real threat, and it’s all a plot so that those currently in power can remain in power.

What does the status of Russia as described on p. 136 say about when this book was written?

An opportunity for a little history, since in 1985 the USSR was still around and still a superpower, so it was credible to believe that it would remain so and possibly expand its borders.

The people of Russia are described more than once in the book as “helots”. What does this word mean and why do the characters use it in reference to the Russians?

“Helot” essentially means serf or slave, indicative of how a lot of people outside of the Soviet Union thought of the Soviets. This question can follow on from the preceding one.

Why is the fantasy game so important to Ender?

By this point in the novel, the game has turned into a reflection of Ender’s belief that he is as cruel as Peter, that he essentially *is* Peter. By now he’s looking for a way to beat it that proves that he isn’t. The tower room with the mirror becomes significant in another way toward the end of the book.

On pp. 165-66, read Ender’s reaction to Val’s letter. Do you think that Graff predicted this reaction?

Graff obviously wants to push Ender in a particular direction, and the letter succeeds at doing that. Whether Graff meant for Ender to deliberately decide that there was nothing he could trust but the game itself is debateable, and open to discussion.

Chapters 10-12

Read Ender's internal monologue on p. 184. Does it remind you of someone else in the story and how they think? Who and why?

The monologue is very reminiscent of how Graff thinks about Ender, and for similar reasons.

The title of chapter 11 is "Veni Vidi Vici," which means "I came, I saw, I conquered." Why is the chapter titled this?

Ender's army defeats all comers in this chapter.

Why do you think the details of Mazer's strategy are omitted in the invasion videos?

This is explained later, but is mysterious at this point in the story. Readers may guess that the buggers, being insectlike, have a hive mind, so defeating the "mind" defeats the rest of the army. (If they've read or seen *Starship Troopers*, which also uses this idea, they're more likely to guess.)

Why is the fight with Bonzo in chapter 12 important?

There are two reasons the discussion should touch on: one, this directly leads to Ender being sent to command school, and two, it's a new, higher-stakes version of his confrontation with Stilson in chapter one. The need to not only defeat his enemy in this fight, but permanently has been a recurring theme throughout this story. Returning to this question when readers have finished the novel might be worthwhile, because in a way, the ending counters this theme with an alternative.

Chapters 13-15

On p. 253, Val thinks, "Perhaps it's impossible to wear an identity without becoming what you pretend to be." How does this apply to Val, and to other characters in the story?

Val has consistently been forced to adopt a position that she initially didn't hold. However, the person this applies to the most strongly is Ender, who is being deliberately molded into a particular kind of person. Readers should also be encouraged to consider whether Peter, in wearing his persona of Locke, has been changed by the experience, much as Val was changed through the persona of Demosthenes. Later, when the nature of the buggers is revealed, readers should be encouraged to extend the question to them as well.

In chapter 13, how has Ender changed? How much of his personality as shown in this chapter was there all along?

This question is subjective, but can be used to encourage readers to look back at previous chapters, and at the question Ender repeatedly asks himself: is he just like Peter?

Why does Ender want Peter to love him?

This is a very subjective question. Readers should be encouraged to reconsider Ender and Peter's relationship in light of Ender making this comment.

Why is the attack on the buggers being carried out the way it's described in chapter 13?

This question can be used to encourage readers to look at one of the story's science fictional aspects. If readers are confused about why the last battle in the war took place decades in the past, this is an opportunity for clarification that also foreshadows the ending of the book. Communication travels instantly (via the ansible), but people do not. The ships attacking the buggers left decades ago but are only now about to arrive, and one of the reasons Ender is being brought along so quickly is so he'll be ready to command them when they get there.

What is different about Ender's new teacher in chapter 14?

Aside from the fact that he's Mazer Rackham, the last commander against the buggers, he's the first teacher Ender has had who's smarter than he is. He's also the first who really understands the enemy the way that Ender needs to, in order to win.

Why do you think Mazer's attack worked? What does it say about the buggers?

The buggers are hive-mind creatures, essentially controlled by their queen. This echoes an earlier question regarding videos of previous engagements.

What do you think of the conversation that opens chapter 15? Do the ends justify the means?

The dialogue here describes what was done to Ender and the other students to prepare them, and some of the terms used are arguably justifiable. Card doesn't address this question directly, but readers may be moved to discuss whether the way events played out in this novel were inevitable, and whether things could have been done differently. The dialogue suggests that Graff and Anderson know that these things are open questions, but that they also feel that what's done is done, and after all, they won.

Read what Val says on p. 345 about control. Do you agree? Why or why not?

This is a very subjective question, intended to get readers thinking about their own lives and whether Val's observation is true of them. Either position is arguable; in fact, the debate can be couched as the old fate v. free will argument.

Why do you think the book ends the way it does?

Despite his heroic status, Ender seems to feel a need for atonement, but being the speaker for the dead, and especially for the enemy he defeated, is important because of humanity's new impetus toward colonization at the end of the novel. He wants to prevent the miscommunication that was at the heart of the war from happening again. Also, of course, it sets up the sequel, which readers may want to read on their own.