

Working Toward the Dream

Complete the following SOAPStone to analyze the interview “Roberto Acuna Talks About Farm Workers,” recorded by Studs Terkel.

<p>Speaker</p> <p>What can you say about the speaker based on references in the text? Is race, gender, class, or age important?</p>	
<p>Occasion</p> <p>What issues may have motivated the speaker to think about the incident or occasion?</p>	
<p>Audience</p> <p>Who is being addressed? Identify some characteristics of the audience.</p>	
<p>Purpose</p> <p>What is the message and how does the author want the audience to respond?</p>	
<p>Subject</p> <p>What is the focus? The subject can be stated by using a few words.</p>	
<p>Tone</p> <p>Using textual support, how would you describe the overall tone of the passage?</p>	

Roberto Acuna Talks About Farm Workers

from Working

by Studs Terkel

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Studs Terkel, famous Chicago radio broadcaster, interviewer, and writer, was born Louis Terkel in 1912 in New York. A Pulitzer Prize winner, Terkel has written more than two dozen books, but he is probably most famous for his oral histories.

I walked out of the fields two years ago. I saw the need to change the California feudal system, to change the lives of farm workers, to make these huge corporations feel they're not above anybody. I am thirty-four years old and I try to organize for the United Farm Workers of America....

If you're picking lettuce, the thumbnails fall off 'cause they're banged on the box. Your hands get swollen. You can't slow down because the foreman sees you're so many boxes behind and you'd better get on. But people would help each other. If you're feeling bad that day, somebody who's feeling pretty good would help. Any people that are suffering have to stick together, whether they like it or not, whether they be black, brown, or pink....

I began to see how everything was so wrong. When growers can have an intricate watering system to irrigate their crops but they can't have running water inside the houses of workers. Veterinarians tend to the needs of domestic animals but they can't have medical care for the workers. They can have land subsidies¹ for the growers but they can't have adequate unemployment compensation for the workers. They treat him like a farm implement. In fact, they treat their implements better and their domestic animals better. They have heat and insulated² barns for the animals but the workers live in beat-up shacks with no heat at all.

Illness in the fields is 120 percent higher than the average rate for industry. It's mostly back trouble, rheumatism, and arthritis, because of the damp weather and the cold. Stoop labor is very hard on a person. Tuberculosis is high. And now because of the pesticides, we have many respiratory diseases.

The University of California at Davis had government experiments with pesticides and chemicals. They get a bigger crop each year. They haven't any

¹ **subsidy:** a grant or contribution of money

² **insulate:** To prevent the passage of heat by surrounding or filling with material that prevents

My Notes

GRAMMAR & USAGE

Repeating a grammatical structure, even one as simple as an infinitive phrase, creates rhythm and emphasis through parallel structure. Notice how Robert Acuna emphasizes his commitment with parallel infinitive phrases: "I saw the need to change the California feudal system, to change the lives of farm workers, to make these huge corporations feel they're not above anybody."

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WORD CONNECTIONS

Pesticide is a hybrid word from the English word *pest* and *-cide*, which comes from the Latin word *cidium* meaning “a killing.” Other words based on *cidium* include *homicide* and *suicide*.

My Notes

regard as to what safety precautions are needed. In 1964 and '65, an airplane was spraying these chemicals on the fields. Spraying rigs they're called. Flying low, the wheels got tangled in the fence wire. The pilot got up, dusted himself off, and got a drink of water. He died of convulsions. The ambulance attendants got violently sick because of the pesticide he had on his person. A little girl was playing around a sprayer. She stuck her tongue on it. She died instantly.

These pesticides affect the farm worker through the lungs. He breathes it in. He gets no compensation. All they do is say he's sick. They don't investigate the cause.

There were times when I felt I couldn't take it anymore. It was 105 in the shade and I'd see endless rows of lettuce and I felt my back hurting.... I felt the frustration of not being able to get out of the fields. I was getting ready to jump any foreman who looked at me cross-eyed. But until two years ago, my world was still very small.

I would read all these things in the papers about Cesar Chavez and I would denounce³ him because I still had that thing about becoming a first class patriotic citizen. In Mexicali⁴ they would pass out leaflets and I would throw 'em away. I never participated. The grape boycott didn't affect me much because I was in lettuce. It wasn't until Chavez came to Salinas⁵ where I was working in the fields, that I saw what a beautiful man he was. I went to this rally, I still intended to stay with the company. But something — I don't know — I was close to the workers. They couldn't speak English and wanted me to be their spokesman in favor of going on strike. I don't know — I just got caught up with it all, the beautiful feeling of solidarity.

You'd see the people on the picket lines at four in the morning, at the camp fires, heating up beans and coffee and tortillas. It gave me a sense of belonging. These were my own people and they wanted change. I knew this is what I was looking for. I just didn't know it before.

My mom had always wanted me to better myself. I wanted to better myself because of her. Now when the strikes started, I told her I was going to join the union and the whole movement. I told her I was going to work without pay. She said she was proud of me. (His eyes glisten. A long, long pause.) See, I told her I wanted to be with my people. If I were a company man, no one would like me anymore. I had to belong to somebody and this was it right here. She said, “I pushed you in your early years to try to better yourself and get a social position. But I see that's not the answer. I know I'll be proud of you.”

All kinds of people are farm workers, not just Chicanos. Filipinos started the strike. We have Puerto Ricans and Appalachians too, Arabs, some

³ **denounce**: to openly condemn or censure

⁴ **Mexicali** (mek' si kal' ē): Capital of the Mexican state of Baja California Norte

⁵ **Salinas** (sə lē'nās): City in west central California

