A New England Prison Diary

Classroom Discussion Questions from Martin Hershock

The period between the American Revolution and the War of 1812 was a moment of profound change for the new American republic.  Now independent and free to find their own way in the world, the American people worked to develop their own identity and to create institutions compatible with their own values and beliefs.  That this process was a messy one no one can deny.  Religious strife, economic growth and dislocation, political strife, and social and personal stress were everywhere evident.  This book, through the use of Timothy Meader Joy’s life story and prison diary, examines the contours of this change and the efforts of one ordinary person to navigate these exciting, yet treacherous, times.  In doing so I hope it reveals not only something about this important historical era but also something about the complexity and significance of a life lived.

#1  Was Timothy Joy’s decision to go into business in Middleton a rational decision?  Why or why not?

#2  What was it about the Democratic-Republican Party and its ideals that resonated with Joy?

#3  In your view, what was Joy’s primary purpose in writing his diary?

#4  Can it be argued that Timothy Joy is a representative figure for his era?  Why or why not?

#5  Joy’s religious struggles are clearly evident throughout his diary.  In what ways does this struggle reflect the broader change characteristic of the era?

#6  How can we best explain Joy’s allegations about Timothy Pickering?

#7  How does the author portray Joy?  As a victim? As a fool? What evidence can you point to in support your conclusion?  How would you portray Joy?  Why?