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Teaching Khaled Hosseini's

The Kite Runner

from

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by

Kelli Kuntz



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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *The Kite Runner*

THE *KITE RUNNER* IS A NOVEL with strong elements of historical fiction. It is a story in which the setting plays a significant role in the plot, and the social, cultural, and historical background directly affect the characters' lives and the plot's events.

One thing that is crucial to the creation of effective historical fiction is the authenticity of the author's portrayal of time and place. Characters in historical fiction may be either imaginary people or portrayals of actual historical figures. In *The Kite Runner*, the characters are all imaginary, but encounter real historical events—most notably the Russian invasion and the Taliban takeover. These real events affect the fictional plot and characters. Baba and Amir escape to Pakistan and then to America because the Russians make life too difficult for them. Hassan is fearful of the Taliban and is later killed by them. Amir's return to Kabul as an adult is fictional, but may represent the actual condition of the city. The orphanage where Sohrab had been kept may represent the condition of actual orphanages, and Assef's public stoning of people for adultery may represent actual events during the Taliban rule. Hosseini also makes a brief reference to the attacks on the World Trade Center on September, 11, 2001, near the end of the novel. Additionally, he describes the activism of Amir and Soraya, as well as the change in the American people and their newly acquired knowledge of and interest in Afghanistan. These details probably represent real experiences for Afghan-Americans.

The Kite Runner is told from the first-person limited perspective. Amir narrates the entire story from his own point of view, making the descriptions and experiences recorded inherently one-sided. The reader cannot rely on objectivity in the book because every event is filtered through Amir's memories, biases, and emotions. While several events in the story really occurred, descriptions of characters and situations are Amir's interpretation.

Marxist Approach Applied to *The Kite Runner*



Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses, who actually operated them, not in the hands of those few who owned them. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies



Activity One

Defining Amir as a Tourist in Afghanistan

1. Copy and distribute the handout *The Kite Runner: Marxism Activity One Worksheet*.
2. Divide the class into groups of two or three.
3. Have students read Farid's speech from Chapter 19 in which he tells Amir that he has been a tourist in Afghanistan all of his life.
4. Have students follow the instructions on the handout, study the text, and answer the questions.
5. Reconvene the class and allow each group to report its findings.
6. As a full class, discuss the following questions:
 - Does the relationship between Amir and Farid serve as a representation of the struggle between social classes?
 - How do Amir's and Farid's lives differ as a result of social class?
 - Is Amir's social class different in the United States from what it is in Afghanistan? Why?

Feminist Approach Applied to *The Kite Runner*



Notes on the Feminist Approach

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY. Feminism in literature is an even newer area of study and thought. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The social movement of feminism found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts to reevaluate their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes about women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing elements in literature that have been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that are clearly rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females should be added and judged on a different, feminine scale.



Activity One

Examining the Lack of Women in *The Kite Runner*

1. Copy and distribute the worksheet for *The Kite Runner Feminist Activity One*.
2. Briefly, in class discussion, list all of the female characters who play a role—major and minor—in the novel.
3. Divide the class into pairs or small groups.
4. Have the students complete the chart on the handout, indicating women who are introduced in Afghanistan and those introduced in the United States on the right. Then, have them describe each woman's role and evaluate her significance to the story.
5. Reconvene the class and discuss the role of women in the novel:
 - Are there any major female characters in the novel? If so, who are they, and what role(s) do they play?
 - What is the significance of the fact that neither Amir's nor Hassan's mother is a character in the book?
 - What is especially significant about Hassan's mother's absence?
 - What roles do Amir's and Hassan's wives play in the novel? What impact do they have on their husbands' lives? How do they affect the plot of the novel? The theme?
 - Overall, how much impact do female characters have on the story? Why?
 - Are the female characters in this novel round or flat? Static or dynamic? Are they integral to the novel or merely functional?
 - From a feminist perspective, what conclusions can you draw from the role(s) of women in this novel?

New Historicist Approach Applied to *The Kite Runner*

Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as that culture really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons. First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another culture is often lost to history because it is the powerful that have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the ironclad truth. Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the south during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of and change certain elements of that culture.



Activity One

Understanding Khaled Hosseini and His Creation of *The Kite Runner*

1. Copy and distribute the handouts Khaled Hosseini Fact Sheet and Inferences About Khaled Hosseini's Beliefs, Values, and Opinions.
2. Divide the class into three groups (or a number of groups divisible by three).
3. Assign each, or allow each to choose, one of the following topics (from the *Inferences* handout):
 - Race / Ethnic Relations
 - Social Class Relations
 - Historical Events
4. Have each group divide the novel as it chooses and examine the novel for evidence of Hosseini's views of its assigned topic.
5. Reconvene the class and have each group report its findings.
6. As a class, discuss the nature of the view of Afghan life and culture provided by Hosseini. Has he succeeded in doing as his wife suggested: "to show the world a different side of Afghanistan: an Afghanistan as a community of families, consisting of people oppressed and driven into poverty by the mujahideen and the Taliban"?