

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Kite Runner

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The Kite Runner

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. explain the use of metaphor in setting tone and mood.
2. analyze the use of irony in creating tone and mood.
3. analyze the function of the flashback structure.
4. trace the development of a dynamic character.
5. analyze the significance of the novel within the context of Afghan history and politics.
6. trace the development of complex and intertwining themes found in the novel, including:
 - a. discrimination fosters hatred,
 - b. the past cannot be buried,
 - c. true friends make great sacrifices for each other,
 - d. guilt is a powerful enemy.
7. analyze the use of the first-person limited narrator.
8. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
9. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
10. offer a close reading of *The Kite Runner* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

Lecture Notes

AFGHAN SOCIETY

Afghanistan is located between the Middle East, south Asia, and central Asia, a geographical situation that has provided it with a diverse mix of religions, ethnicities, and cultural influences. The population has traditionally been organized into many tribal groups based on religion, language, ethnicity, location, and family relationships. The rugged terrain in Afghanistan has resulted in significant isolation of each community, creating strong bonds among the people in a given area, and strong—at times bitter—distrust and rivalry between people in neighboring areas. Peace has been difficult to establish in this region, which has been the site of continual invasions and occupations throughout its history. The one unifying element in Afghanistan is Islam, which is, ironically, also a source of violent division. While the majority of Afghans call themselves Muslim, the two main sects within the Muslim faith contribute to the violent division in the country.

The largest and most powerful ethnic group in Afghanistan are the Pashtuns, most of whom are Sunni Muslims. Pashtuns primarily speak the Pashto language, although some Pashtuns speak Dari. Both Pashto and Dari belong to the Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family. Pashto and Dari are the official languages of Afghanistan. Zahir Shah (see timeline that follows) declared Pashto the National Language at the beginning of his reign in 1933, but Dari is used for business and government transactions. A Sunni is a member of one of the two major branches of Islam. Sunnite Muslims form the majority and see themselves as the “mainstream” and “traditional” sect of Islam. In *The Kite Runner*, Amir and Baba are Pashtuns.

A smaller and often persecuted group in Afghanistan are the Hazaras, who speak a dialect of Dari and live primarily in central Afghanistan. Hazaras are members of every Muslim religious sect in the country: Ismaili, Twelver, Shi'a, and Sunni. Hazaras are generally believed to be of Mongol descent, and many claim to be descended from Genghis Khan himself. The Hazaras are easily distinguished by their Asian facial features. They are often treated as subhuman, as the reader sees so often in *The Kite Runner*. Hassan and Ali are Hazaras, and the reader witnesses the racial prejudice to which they are subjected. Hosseini also describes the Taliban's program of “ethnic cleansing,” which is the cause of Hassan's murder.

Narrative Techniques and Devices

LITERARY ALLUSIONS

Les Miserables

When Amir visits the American embassy in an effort to adopt Sohrab, Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* is alluded to twice. Amir says that he feels like Jean Valjean sitting across from Javert.

Translated from French, *Les Miserables* means "the miserable ones." The story follows the life of Jean Valjean, a peasant who has been released from prison, where he served nineteen years for stealing bread for his starving sister and an additional fourteen years for trying to escape. Out of habit, Valjean steals a silver coin from a boy before he realizes what he has done. The theft is reported to the police, and, although he searches for the boy to return the coin, Valjean has become a wanted man again. If caught, he will spend the rest of his life in prison. After six years, Valjean has taken on a new name, Monsieur Madeleine, and become a wealthy business owner and mayor of his town. His physical strength arouses the suspicion of Javert, the town's police inspector, who remembers that Valjean was very strong while in prison. The story continues with Valjean as protagonist and Javert as tireless antagonist. In the end, Valjean finds happiness, and Javert commits suicide after having been saved by Valjean during a student uprising.

When Amir says that he feels like Valjean sitting across from Javert, he is saying that he feels like a criminal facing his staunchest accuser. Raymond Andrews seems utterly indifferent to Amir's plight.

Shahnamah

This is the book that Amir reads to Hassan throughout their childhood and to Sohrab in the hospital. Written around 1,000 C.E., by the Persian poet Ferdowsi, it is considered a masterpiece. It tells the story of Iran, both mythical and historical, from the creation of the world to the Islamic conquest of Iran in the 7th century. Hassan's favorite story in the *Shahnamah* is "Rostam and Sohrab." Hassan named his son after the central character in this story.

Rostam's horse is stolen one day while he is hunting. The king of Samangan asks Rostam to stay with him while he looks for the horse. The king's daughter is overcome with desire for Rostam and sleeps with him. Rostam gives her a clasp to give to their child when he is born. The next day Rostam leaves.

The King's daughter names her son Sohrab. He is physically strong and talented. Sohrab wants to know who his father is and refuses to keep his mother's secret. Sohrab raises an army and declares war so that he can overthrow the king and have the throne for himself. In fighting to protect the king, Rostam kills Sohrab, not knowing that he has killed his son. When he discovers the clasp, he grieves and builds Sohrab a golden tomb.

This story of an illegitimate son is a parallel to Hassan, who does not know who his real father is. Hassan identifies with Sohrab and his desire to claim his rightful place as son to his great father, making the reader suspect that Hassan has some suspicion all along.

Symbolism in *The Kite Runner*

Kites

The novel begins and ends with kites flying in the air. Amir and Hassan spend much of their time flying kites and competing in kite fighting tournaments. The central conflict in the novel emerges on the night of their most successful kite fighting tournament when Hassan is raped while running the last kite for Amir. The kites represent their friendship and their childhood. After the rape, there is no more kite fighting, which is eventually banned by the Taliban. The innocence of their childhood is taken from them. Their friendship is shattered, so the kites disappear until Amir finds a way to redeem himself, “to be good again.”

Brown Corduroy Pants

The image of the corduroy pants haunts Amir for years. He sees the pants in a pile while standing in the alley, too afraid to intervene while Assef rapes Hassan. These pants are a reminder of what happened to Hassan and Amir’s cowardice. Amir carries his guilt over not intervening that day for years and is reminded every time he sees the image of the corduroy pants in his memory.

The Sheep

The sheep is sacrificed every year as a commemoration of Abraham’s obedience to God. Hassan and Sohrab are both compared to this sheep, Hassan in his resignation and willingness to sacrifice himself repeatedly for Amir; and Sohrab in that the sheep’s eyes are outlined with mascara, just as Sohrab’s are when he saves Amir from Assef.

The Pomegranate Tree

Hassan and Amir spend hours under the tree reading and playing. They carve their names into the tree as children, and it is one of the first places that Amir wants to visit when he returns to Kabul as an adult. Like the kites, the tree represents their friendship. As adults, both Amir and Hassan comment on its fruitless condition, a symbol of the life that has been drained from their friendship.

The Kite Runner

Chapter 1

1. How does the use of Chapter 1 to introduce the flashback establish the overall mood of the novel? How would it be different if the story were told without the flashback?

2. What does the reader know about the narrator's present life, and how do we know?

3. What mood does the image of the two kites create? How does Hosseini create this mood?

Chapter 5

1. How does Hosseini's description of Assef let the reader know immediately that he is the antagonist?

2. What does Assef foreshadow when he talks about his admiration for Hitler?

3. How does Hassan's harelip foster Amir's jealousy of him? Explain this irony.

4. What is suggested by the affection that Baba shows to Hassan?

Chapter 10

1. How does Hosseini highlight Amir’s cowardice in the scene with the Russian soldier?

2. How do Hosseini’s word choice and sentence structure convey Amir’s fear as he climbs into the fuel tank?

3. Explain the tragic irony of Kamal’s death. What qualities do Amir and Kamal have in common?

Chapter 15

1. How does the tone of the writing change now that Amir is in Pakistan? Comment specifically on how Hosseini creates this change by looking at his sentence structure.

2. What is the significance of Rahim Khan’s story about the soccer game?

3. This chapter concludes with a return to thoughts of Hassan. How does Amir feel about this conversation? What does he fear?

Chapter 20

- 1. What is the importance of the lengthy description of changes that Amir finds on his way to Kabul and in the city itself?

- 2. Explain the significance of Amir’s meeting the old beggar who happened to know his mother. How does this meeting affect Amir?

- 3. Why is the man at the orphanage so suspicious of Amir and Farid? What does his suspicion suggest about the life that he is leading in Kabul?

- 4. What is the effect of the irony in Zaman’s description of the children in the orphanage and his financial situation?

- 5. How does Amir’s experience at the orphanage create a tone of fear and suspense?
