Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for
Fiddler on the Roof
by
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Book Information
Joseph Stein, Fiddler on the Roof
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This play highlights the persecution of the Jews and
the conflict between tradition and change in a small
Russian village near the turn of the twentieth century.

Topics: Arts, Music; Arts, Theater/ Plays; Classics,
Classics (All); Family Life, Misc./ Other;
Popular Groupings, College Bound

Main Characters
Chava    Tevye and Golde's third daughter, who
marries a Russian gentile
Fruma-Sarah    Lazar Wolf's first wife, who has been
dead for a number of years
Fyedka    the Russian gentile who marries Chava
Golde    Tevye's wife
Hodel    Tevye and Golde's second daughter, who
marries Perchik
Lazar Wolf    a butcher who plans to marry Tzeitel
Motel    a local tailor who marries Tzeitel
Perchik    a university student who wins Hodel's
heart
Tevye    a dairyman who breaks with traditions for
the sake of his daughters' happiness
Tzeitel    Tevye and Golde's first daughter, who
marries Motel the tailor
Yente    the local matchmaker

Vocabulary
dowry    the property that a woman brings to her
husband at marriage
Mazeltov    a greeting
obstinate    stubborn
pogrom    an organized massacre

Synopsis
Fiddler on the Roof opens with a man playing a
violin on the roof of Tevye's house, symbolizing the
delicate balance that exists in the village. Tevye is a
Jewish dairyman who lives in Anatevka, Russia in
1905. He is a poor man with a wife and five
daughters, three of whom are of marrying age.
Tevye explains to the audience that Anatevka is a
village steeped in traditions.

Yente, the matchmaker, soon makes an appearance
at Tevye's home. She and Tevye's wife, Golde,
discuss the possibility of Tzeitel, their oldest
daughter, marrying Lazar Wolf, the town butcher.
After Golde and Yente discuss marriage, the three
oldest daughters, Tzeitel, Hodel, and Chava reveal
their fear of marriage. Golde persuades Tevye to
speak with Lazar Wolf, although she does not tell
him of Lazar's intentions toward Tzeitel. Lazar Wolf
and Tevye meet at the local inn. Tevye is convinced
Lazar wants Tevye to sell him his cow. After the
misunderstanding is cleared up, Tevye agrees to the
match and they celebrate. The celebration is
dampened, however, when the Russian constable
warns him that the government expects the
constable to hold "an unofficial demonstration"
against the Jews of the town soon.

The next morning, Hodel questions Perchik, a
university student living with the family, on his
interpretation of a religious lesson, and Perchik
challenges Hodel's traditions. The two end their
confrontation when Perchik shows Hodel a dance.
Shortly after, when Tevye explains to Tzeitel that she
will be marrying Lazar Wolf, Tzeitel bursts into tears.
Tevye tries to persuade Tzeitel that Lazar Wolf is a
good man, but she asks him not to force her into the
marriage. Tevye relents, and Motel, the local tailor,
rushes in to ask Tevye for his permission to marry
Tzeitel. Tevye is stunned and upset, but the two
convince him they should be allowed to wed.

That night, Tevye wakes Golde with his "nightmare"
-- a ruse he creates to avoid conflict with his wife for
breaking his agreement with the prosperous butcher
in favor of the poor tailor. He claims that
Fruma-Sarah, Lazar Wolf's first wife, appeared to him in a dream and was angry that Tzeitel was going to marry Lazar Wolf. Tevye also claims that in the dream Grandma Tzeitel told him that his daughter Tzeitel must marry Motel the tailor. Golde is surprised, but believes the dream to be a sign. She agrees that Tzeitel should not marry Lazar Wolf.

Motel and Tzeitel soon wed in Tevye's yard. The wedding is fraught with disagreements between Lazar Wolf and Tevye, and the tension increases when Perchik breaks tradition by dancing with Hodel. The celebration is ended when the constable and his followers enter and destroy tables and candlesticks. In the fight, Perchik is hit with a club and injured.

In the beginning of the second act, Perchik explains to Hodel that he must go to Kiev to carry on his vision to change society. She is upset that he wants to leave without her, but he asks Hodel to marry him. Hodel agrees, but Perchik explains that he must go immediately and get settled and then send for her later to be married. The two then tell Tevye they are going to marry and only ask for his blessing. Tevye is again upset, but he eventually relents and gives his blessing. Hodel receives news that Perchik has been arrested and sent to Siberia, and she decides to go there to be with him. Tevye asks Hodel to reconsider, but Hodel stands firm and leaves on the train.

Soon after Motel receives his new sewing machine, Tevye learns that Chava plans to marry the Russian man, Fyedka. Tevye is furious and absolutely forbids the marriage. Fyedka is a gentile and, by marrying him, Chava will be leaving their faith and traditions. They marry anyway, and Tevye disowns her. Not long after, the constable tells the villagers that they must leave their homes within three days because of an edict issued in St. Petersburg. The village is shocked and saddened by the news. Many villagers make plans to live with relatives elsewhere, and Tevye and his family decide to move to America. Chava and Fyedka return to tell Tevye they are moving to Cracow, but Tevye does not acknowledge them. As the play ends, Tevye and his family leave the village and Tevye beckons to the fiddler to come with them.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

At the time of the play, Tevye and Golde have been married for twenty-five years. Why do you think Tevye asks Golde if she loves him?

Tevye and Golde did not choose to marry each other. Their marriage was arranged because of the traditions of their society. Their marriage is based on the traditional roles and responsibilities of marriage, not affection. Therefore, the reader can understand why Tevye, after hearing about his daughter's love for a man, would be curious about his wife's feelings toward him.

Literary Analysis

Many traditions are described in this play. The community of Anatevka thrives on the traditions that have been passed down for years. Tevye also explains the roles of each of the sexes. He and the villagers sing about how women must make a "proper home" and the men must read the "Holy Book." Based on these traditions, do you feel that Tzeitel should have married Lazar Wolf?

The answers to this question may vary. Some students will feel that the tradition of matchmaking is very old-fashioned and Tzeitel and Motel have every right to get married. They may point out that arranged marriages are not made for love, but for money and social status. Other students may answer that since the traditions of the village are so important to the villagers, they should not be ignored. They also may feel that because Tevye made an agreement with Lazar Wolf, the agreement should be kept.
Inferential Comprehension
During the course of the play, Tevye sometimes talks directly to the audience. Why do you think he does this?

By speaking directly to the audience, Tevye offers insights and opinions and gives the audience a better understanding of Jewish traditions and the conflicts that arise when they are broken.

Constructing Meaning
Fiddler on the Roof is a musical that involves many characters who are striving to understand their place in society. The three oldest girls, for example, wish to break tradition by marrying the men they love rather than the men their parents choose for them. Which character in this play do you identify with most? Why?

Many readers will identify with the girls. School age children are, at times, expected to abide by the "traditions" of their home and school. By questioning or testing these traditions, many students try to understand their own identity. Some students who read this play, however, may identify with Tevye because they value the stability that traditions provide.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features  Fiddler on the Roof is a play of many moods. Ask your students to describe, in writing, the mood in three of the scenes. Then ask them to discuss moods from these scenes in groups.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors  In the play, the daughters speak of a dowry. Remind your students that a dowry is the possessions that a woman would bring to her husband at their marriage. Ask your students to create a modern dowry. They could describe a suitable dowry on paper, or they could draw the items they feel are important.

Responding to Literature  Fiddler on the Roof is written in play form. Ask your students to form groups and choose their favorite scene. Have them read the scene together. If they choose, they could perform the scene for the class.

Responding to Literature  Divide your class into groups. Ask each group to choose a scene from the book. Have the groups perform the scene for another class. Remind them to be aware of their intended audience. Ask them to be very creative. They need not perform the scene as written. One possibility is to turn the scene into a talk show or a soap opera.