

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Temple of My Familiar

by
Alice Walker

Book Information

Alice Walker, The Temple of My Familiar

Quiz Number: 8673

Pocket Books, Inc, 1989

ISBN 0-671-68399-3; LCCN

417 Pages

Book Level: 7.5

Interest Level: UG

This is a magical story of history, previous lives, and mythic fantasy intended for mature readers.

Topics: Family Life, Misc./Other;
Fantasy/Imagination, Misc./Other; History,
Misc./Other; People, African American;
Popular Groupings, College Bound

Main Characters

Arveyda Carlotta's husband, a musician who touches the lives of many with his craft, who falls in love with Zede and travels with her to her homeland

Carlotta Zede's daughter, who feels betrayed by her husband and mother and begins an affair with Suwelo

Fanny Suwelo's wife, a young black woman who has an affinity for ancient spirits and recognizes a powerful, transcendent attachment to Arveyda

Mary Ann (or Mary Jane) the woman who, as a young radical, frees Zede and Carlotta and, as she ages, studies and moves to Africa to start an art school and later becomes Ola's wife

Miss Lissie a friend of Suwelo's uncle Rafe, who has lived several past lives and offers great insight into the long history of the world

Mr. Hal Miss Lissie's husband and Rafe's friend; a frustrated painter who recognizes only some of the many facets of Miss Lissie's "lives"

Ola Fanny's father, a playwright who composes politically controversial material in Africa

Suwelo a black professor of American history, whose life is changed and consciousness expanded when he meets Lissie and Hal

Zede Carlotta's mother, an educated woman who is arrested in her native South America and later falls in love with her daughter's husband

Vocabulary

antimacassar a small cover on the back or arms of a chair to prevent soiling

asafoetida a bad-smelling gum resin formerly used to treat diseases

beatitudes pronouncements related to religion

chi the vital life force in the body supposedly regulated by acupuncture

didactic morally instructive, or intending to be so

fecundity fruitfulness or fertility

rune any of the characters from an alphabet used by the Scandinavians and other Germanic peoples around 300 AD

totem among ancient peoples, an animal or inanimate object considered a symbol of a given family

verisimilitude the appearance of being true or real

yurt a circular tent of felt or skins stretched over a framework of poles

Synopsis

In this story, the lives of the main characters unfold by means of conversations, letters, and other devices, with constant shifts back and forth in time. Carlotta is a young Latina who has met and married Arveyda. It is not long before the sensitive musician falls in love with Carlotta's mother, Zede, and the two of them travel to South America to explore Zede's heritage. Zede was a young schoolteacher in her native country when she was captured and jailed as a Communist. After escaping from prison, she brings her young daughter to live at the elite "mental hospital" where she works. It is there that she meets a rich young American woman, whose political activism got her sent to the institution. Mary Ann later returns to South America and stages an elaborate "liberation" of the institution, including transporting Zede and her young daughter to America. Carlotta knows none of this until the two return to San Francisco and she is able to listen to Arveyda's musical telling of the story.

Meanwhile, Suwelo comes to Baltimore to settle the

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estate of his late Uncle Rafe. There he meets an amazing elderly couple, friends of his uncle's, who change his life with insight into their own past and the course of human history. Miss Lissie is an ancient spirit who has "dream memories" of other lives going back to human pre-history. Throughout her many long conversations with Suwelo, she reveals she has been a slave, a lion, and even a white man. She tells him that while Mr. Hal loved her, he did not understand the more troubling aspects of her former lives - only Rafe was able to do that. Through Hal, Suwelo heard the story of his and Lissie's childhood on an isolated island near Charleston. The two married and later moved in with Rafe as a communal family. At least one of Hal and Lissie's children was fathered by Rafe.

A connection point between these two stories seems to be Suwelo's wife, Fanny. She is a deeply spiritual woman who "falls in love" with spirits from other times. Disillusioned with her marriage, she accepts her mother's invitation to travel to Africa to meet her father, a political activist in Olinka. After returning home, she discovers that Suwelo has had an affair with the distraught Carlotta. She is disappointed, but the one act she finds most offensive is Suwelo's brutal use of Carlotta's body as a vessel without meaning.

Through various means, Suwelo, Fanny, Carlotta, and Arveyda seek and discover their own immediate and ancient family histories and spiritual underpinnings. For Suwelo, it is only after meeting Lissie and Hal and facing the tragic death of his own parents that he can meet Fanny on her spiritual plane. For Carlotta, hearing the story of her mother's life allows her to stop presenting herself as a sexual object and create music alongside her husband. Fanny's exposure to her father and sister in Africa brings her closer to her own cultural and spiritual center. Arveyda has always accepted his destiny as a musician in "uniting the world," but he comes to grips with his own family history only at the end of the story.

After these personal quests are begun and awareness gained by these four characters, they

become good friends, each sensing that he or she has a role to play in the destiny of the others. Fanny and Arveyda in particular recognize an overwhelming bond that seems to transcend time.

Suwelo now accepts that one of his tasks in life is to make Hal understand all the facets of Lissie that he never faced before. In the end, the enduring symbol of all the "women" that Miss Lissie was is found in a painting done by the lady herself; a proud lion wearing a red, high-heeled slipper.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Fanny's association with her father is a key factor in her personal growth. Ola often shares wisdom and advice of both a political and personal nature with her. "Whatever you do," he tells her, "stay away from those that pity themselves. People who are always complaining have a horrifying tendency to spread their own lead into everybody's arse." Explain the meaning of his advice.

Ola is likely observing that there are those who have had difficulties and choose to burden others with them. He believes that this serves only to spread the trouble, or "lead," to others.

Literary Analysis

What are some of the many techniques by which the stories of the main characters in this book are told?

Answers may include narration by an all-knowing narrator, letters between characters, dialogue between characters, and an audio tape made by Miss Lissie.

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Inferential Comprehension

In what ways has Carlotta changed by the end of the book?

During the period when Arveyda and Zede are traveling together, Carlotta describes herself as "a female impersonator." She wears high heels, make up, and long hair, seeking to attract men, but loathing them at the same time. The pain she feels at the betrayal of her husband and mother is literally palpable to Fanny, who is her masseuse at the time. By the end of the novel, Carlotta shows the physical manifestations of her personal growth. Her hair is cut short. She has forgiven her husband and mother and lives in harmony with both. She works with her husband as a musician and bell chimist.

Constructing Meaning

Arveyda makes reference to an incident in which he observes a fan wearing a T-shirt with the following inscription: "A Woman Without a Man is Like A Fish Without a Bicycle." In your own words, describe the meaning of this sentence.

Fish don't need bicycles, so this ironic simile is hinting that women don't need men. Arveyda observes after seeing the T-shirt that "it was time to retire even my own version of the old-fashioned 'love ballad.'"

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization *The Temple of My Familiar* is a fairly complicated novel in which the timeline is constantly shifted and the lives of the characters intersect in many unexpected ways. Assign students to sketch out a graphical representation, much like a family tree, of the characters in this book and their relationships with each other. The main "branches" of the tree would be Carlotta/Arveyda and Suwelo/ Fanny. Students should attempt to show the many unlikely ways in which the two branches are related.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Towards the end of the book, it is revealed that Suwelo's name is derived, ironically, from the "rune" for

wholeness. Runes are an alphabet script used in northern Europe from the first century up to the Middle Ages. Today, the runes are used by many to serve as symbols and charms. Assign students to research this ancient language and the significance of the symbols as used today.

Understanding the Author's Craft In reading and appreciating works of fiction like *The Temple of My Familiar*, the reader often becomes interested in the author. A reader of this novel, for example, may wonder whether the author's life experiences as a black woman are called upon as fodder for her fiction. Assign students to research the life of Alice Walker using the library or the Internet. Ask them to write a brief composition about their research and how they think the author's life has affected her work.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning In an interesting exchange from the book, Miss Lissie talks to Suwelo about how the ancient religion of the world was co-opted by men who were fearful of the power of a female god and embraced a religion where women had no role. She tells him, "It is as if each man forces every other man to go out into the night without a candle, to go out among the speaking without a tongue, to go out among the seeing without an eye, to go out among the standing without a leg." This series of metaphors serves to emphasize the point, and the repetition makes it memorable to the reader. As an exercise in the use of metaphor, initiate a class discussion in which students attempt to construct additional metaphors along a similar line.