

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

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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.

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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.

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.

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