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Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author’s life can inform and expand the reader’s understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author’s experience. In this lesson, explore the author’s life to understand the novel more fully.

Like her character Gogol in *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri is the child of Indian immigrants who came to the U.S. to pursue better educational and career opportunities. Her family arrived in the U.S. when she was three, and settled in Rhode Island, where her father worked as a librarian and her mother as a teacher. Although she preferred jeans to traditional Indian clothing as a teen, Lahiri has said in interviews that she never considered herself fully American, or fully Indian. Also like Gogol, Lahiri’s “pet” name, Jhumpa, came to be used in place of her “good” names, Nilanjana and Sudeshna. The choice of the name “Jhumpa” is perhaps even more unique than the choice of “Gogol.” Lahiri notes that it is closest to “jhuma,” which refers to the sound of a baby’s rattle.

Discussion Activities

Have students keep reader’s journals in which they record a brief personal response to each reading assignment. In class, listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Ask students to note key points from the Guide in their journals. Have students read “Introduction to the Novel,” “Jhumpa Lahiri,” and “An Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri” from the Reader’s Guide. Divide the class into three groups, and assign each group to present the main points from one of the essays to the whole class.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a one-page essay about when, where, and why their families came to live in the United States, using what they know of family lore, and stories that have been passed from one generation to the next. Students should mention their connections, if any, to their countries of origin, and any traditions that the family has maintained across generations.

Homework

Read Chapter One and Handout One: Hindu Wedding Traditions and Handout Two: Naming Ceremony and First Rice Ceremony. Prepare students to read 30 to 50 pages each night in order to finish the book in eight sessions.

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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes within the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

The Namesake opens in 1968 and spans more than three decades to 2000. While in many respects the Ganguli family leads a normal suburban existence, there is tension between generations. Parents Ashoke and Ashima socialize with other Bengali families; they remain mostly untouched by the countercultural movements that dominated America in the 1970s. Although not especially devout, the parents take pains to observe important Hindu rituals and holidays, and their parties are attended by dozens of two-generation immigrant families like their own. In contrast, Gogol and his younger sister Sonia embrace American culture. They are uncomfortable on their trips to India, and as an adult, Gogol envies his girlfriend Maxine's cultural ease, embarrassed for her to see his mother's earnestness and lack of sophistication.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to discuss Ashoke and Ashima's brief courtship and arranged marriage, described on pages 7–10. Draw their attention to cultural rituals, such as Ashima being carried to meet her groom on a piri, or wooden bench. Have students talk about how these customs differ from weddings that they might have attended. Read and discuss Handouts One and Two.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write two pages about a ritual—wedding, funeral, *bat* or *bar mitzvah*, christening, etc.—that they have attended with family or friends. They should focus on the ritual's significance for their family, their faith, and their community.

Homework

Read Chapters Two and Three.

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Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story, with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves his or her point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Namesake contains multiple third-person narrators, meaning that the story is often told from different points of view. Gogol along with his mother and father are the primary third-person narrators, but Lahiri also employs a more distanced narrative voice that is slightly outside the story and seems distinct from any of the characters. She occasionally uses this detached voice at the opening of chapters, which gives the reader a broader perspective on the characters and helps smooth transitions in the novel. Lahiri also uses this narrative stance, along with chapter subheadings that identify the year, to guide readers’ understanding of the novel’s timeline.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to identify places within the first three chapters, and between chapters, where the narration shifts between one character and another, or shifts from one character to the more distanced outside narrator. Students should look for white spaces (breaks) within chapters, as these often signal a shift in narration.

Writing Exercise

The novel describes Ashoke and Ashima’s very different views of their life after moving to the suburbs. Ashoke loves his new teaching job, but Ashima is lonely, homesick, and bored. Ask students to write about how these two characters perceive the same circumstances from different vantage points, and how the two different points of view shape the reader’s perceptions of the Gangulis’ life.

Homework

Read Chapters Four and Five. Have students make note in their reader’s journals of places where the point of view shifts from one character to another.

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Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a "hero." An "antihero" is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters that hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a "foil," has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the "antagonist," opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

Gogol is the main protagonist of *The Namesake*, but he is not portrayed as a hero. His flaw, or central struggle, is his discomfort and lack of solid connection with either his inherited culture or the contemporary culture around him. He is chronically ill at ease, keeping himself at a distance from his loved ones on both sides of the cultural divide. By the end of the novel, Gogol will have grown and developed as a character. He will have made some progress toward resolving this central conflict, although the reader understands that his journey is not yet complete. Gogol's development toward the end of the novel is shaped by traumatic life events, as well as by the major characters (his mother and father) and minor characters (his sister Sonia, his girlfriend Maxine, his wife Moushumi) who serve as foils.

Discussion Activities

At the end of Chapter Five, Gogol's father Ashoke finally tells him about the train accident that he survived as a young man, and that led to Gogol's naming (years later) after the Russian author whom Ashoke was reading at the time. Ask students to discuss why Gogol reacts so badly to the story of the accident. They should describe how knowing these facts changes Gogol's views about his father's past.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a comparison between the 14-year-old Gogol from Chapter Four with the college-student Gogol in Chapter Five. What elements of Gogol's character have stayed the same? How, if at all, has he changed?

Homework

Read Chapter Six and Handout Three: The Taj Mahal from the Teacher's Guide. Have students identify ways in which Maxine Ratliff serves as a foil for Gogol's character.

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Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, taste)—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language.

Lahiri uses rich, figurative language throughout *The Namesake*. Her descriptions of food, clothing, furnishings, and the interiors and exteriors of homes and buildings are often vivid and detailed, representing far more than just the items themselves. Ashima's hunger during her pregnancy for a specific type of Indian snack, and the multicourse meals she routinely prepares for guests, evoke her homesickness and her desire to re-create the sensual pleasures of her country of origin for herself and those she loves. Similarly, Gogol is entranced by the house where Maxine Ratliff lives with her parents—from the brightly painted walls to the woodwork and furniture, even the books. It is fitting that Lahiri made her main character an architect, someone who would pay special attention to the symmetry and grace of historic buildings.

Discussion Activities

Divide the class into three groups, and assign each group two of the chapters read so far (One through Six). Have each group identify at least three or four evocative passages in their assigned chapters, and organize them around what type of sensory experiences they invoke. Note that Lahiri does not make heavy use of similes and metaphors. Ask students to identify other techniques she uses to make her descriptive language so powerful.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a descriptive passage of two or three paragraphs about an object they see in the classroom, or another sensory experience—taste, smell, or touch—that they've had in the recent past.

Homework

Read Chapter Seven. Have students pick out memorable images from the chapter and make note of them in their reader's journals.

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Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated experience of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of a story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

Gogol Ganguli's unusual name is one of the most prominent symbols in the novel. It represents important concepts, or threads, that tie the scenes of the novel together and help create a whole. For example, Gogol's parents are taken aback to learn that they need to provide an official name for their baby before leaving the hospital, because in their culture children often go years without one. This lack of knowledge about American customs negatively affects Gogol's self-perception for many years. Similarly, the book of Gogol's short stories that Gogol's father gives him for his 14th birthday is a symbol, connecting Gogol's name with important elements of his father's past. That Gogol fails at first to grasp the book's significance only adds to its power as a symbol of missed connections.

Discussion Activities

Divide students into three groups. Ask each group to identify one of the other symbols from the chapters they've read so far. Good choices might include Ashoke's shoes that Ashima tries on in Chapter One, the gravestones from which Gogol takes rubbings in Chapter Three, or Ashima's three address books, referenced at the beginning of Chapter Seven.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write about their own name or nickname. What does the name mean? Why was it given? Does it have any special symbolism or meaning? Encourage students to mention whether they know of other people, or fictional characters, who have the same name, and if so, how it feels to share the name with that person. Ask them to consider why names matter to individuals and families.

Homework

Read Chapter Eight.

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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

As the protagonist of the novel, Gogol's struggles are largely internal. From the outside, his life proceeds along a predictable path, through school and college, romantic relationships, and marriage. Although he is flawed—distant from his parents, and secretive even in his most intimate relationships—Gogol is also a sympathetic character, because Lahiri reveals to the reader the depths of his confusion and alienation from both of the worlds he inhabits. In addition, Gogol is sympathetic because he is self-aware; he knows when he has disrespected his parents, and he reacts to his own bad behavior by withdrawing even further from those who love him. Many readers may find certain aspects of Gogol's flaws within themselves. Gogol's father's death causes him to re-examine, however belatedly, his relationship with his family, and it could be argued that he becomes a better and more dutiful son. At the end of the novel Gogol is still a young man, not fully evolved.

Discussion Activities

Divide the class into three groups, one representing Gogol, one his father, and one his mother. Ask each group to create a brief timeline of their character's development through the novel, noting which events have the greatest impact and how their character changes or doesn't change, as a result.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write two or three paragraphs about Gogol's strengths and weaknesses, with specific examples of situations that bring out the best, or the worst, in him.

Homework

Read Chapter Nine. Have students compare the details of Gogol and Moushumi's wedding to those described in Handout One.

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Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

The action of *The Namesake* is largely interior, in that most of the tension is derived from the characters' conflicting feelings, and their relationships to one another. At no point is Gogol in any physical danger. The most dramatic event in the novel, Gogol's father's death, actually happens "offstage," meaning that the reader does not witness the action, but only learns of it after the fact. In this example, a single sentence informs Ashima, and the reader, of what has happened: "And then the young woman tells [Ashima] that the patient, Ashoke Ganguli, has expired." Tellingly, Lahiri chooses to cast the novel's most action-filled sequence, the train accident experienced by Ashoke, as a flashback, which lessens its dramatic weight and puts it into the background of the novel. While the event is important—it shapes Ashoke's character and eventually influences his choice of a name for his child—it is not a significant driver of the plot, since the reader knows at the outset that Ashoke survives the experience.



Discussion Activities

Ask students to create a graph of the five or six most significant events in Chapters One through Nine, indicating which ones carry the most tension and forward momentum for the plot. Students should discuss how the story propels the reader forward, given its lack of dramatic action.



Writing Exercise

Have students re-read the scene at the end of Chapter 7 in which an adult Gogol remembers walking along the breakwater at Cape Cod with his father. Students should write two or three paragraphs about why this memory matters to Gogol and how the flashback functions as a fulcrum point in the novel.



Homework

Read the final three chapters of *The Namesake*. Have students outline two or three of the book's major themes in their reader's journals.

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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises in order to interpret the novel in specific ways.

Cultural identity and assimilation

As he grows to adulthood, Gogol experiences over and over again the conflict between his parents' attachment to their culture of origin, and his wish to be fully American. His parents never completely accept how Americanized their children are: "For when Ashima and Ashoke close their eyes it never fails to unsettle them, that their children sound just like Americans." Ashoke, perhaps because he is more involved in the outside world, accepts certain aspects of American life, but until the novel's final chapters, Ashima remains deeply homesick and distrustful of the world around her. Have students discuss how each of these character's attitudes and prejudices influence the others, and which view they find most sympathetic or understandable.

Marriage and intimacy

Gogol's parents have an arranged marriage; they start out as near strangers, but grow much closer as the novel progresses, through the births of their children, deaths of beloved relatives, and the advancement of Ashoke's career. In contrast, Gogol has a number of failed romantic relationships, and his brief marriage ends suddenly, after his discovery of Moushumi's infidelity. Have students discuss whether or not Lahiri is making an argument in support of arranged marriage in the novel. Is Ashima and Ashoke's marriage successful because they enter into it with different expectations than is typical in western ideas of romantic love? Does Gogol's marriage fail because of his character or Moushumi's, or because of their cultural dislocations?



Homework

Have students begin their essays, using the Essay Topics. Essay outlines are due in the next class.

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Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to describe the characteristics of a great book. What elevates a work of fiction to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, within groups, other books they know that include some of these characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *The Namesake*? Is this a great novel?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. *The Namesake* primarily focuses on its characters' inner lives, with less emphasis on sweeping political, religious, or moral themes. To what extent are Gogol's attitudes and experiences unique to him? To what extent are they larger in scope, and applicable to generations of immigrants and their families? How are the novel's themes of cultural dislocation particular to Indian immigrants and how are they applicable to other cultures?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a short character sketch of Gogol, ten years after the conclusion of the novel, when he is just over 40. What will he be like, and what will have been his successes and challenges as he nears middle age? Ask students to explain how understanding Gogol's maturation as a character demonstrates the novel's larger themes.

Homework

Have students finish their essays and present their topics and arguments to the class.

Hindu Wedding Traditions

There are two weddings in *The Namesake*. The first, Ashima's marriage to Ashoke, is mentioned only in a brief flashback, but the second, Gogol's marriage to Moushumi, is described in greater detail. Although their wedding is more formal than either of the characters would have preferred, it is still greatly simplified from the elaborate, multi-day wedding celebrations that are common in Hindu culture even today.

Hindu weddings derive many of their traditions from the Vedas, sacred religious texts that are among the oldest in the world. Marriage is one of 16 sacraments described in the Vedas, and is envisioned as a joining of two families, not just a bride and groom. To that end, the parents of the couple may take a larger role in the ceremony than in western traditions.

Prior to the wedding, the bride and her close female friends and family will have elaborate designs painted on their hands with henna, a reddish, plant-based dye. These designs, called *mehndi*, signify the endurance of the marriage. During the ceremony, the bridegroom may put vermilion powder (a brighter red), signifying marriage, on the bride's forehead or in the part of her hair. She will continue to wear this powder for as long as she is married.

Wedding saris are traditionally red, with gold threading, although today they may be found in other colors. The groom will likely wear an embroidered tunic and loose fitting *dhoti*, or wrapped trousers.

The day of the wedding may commence with a *puja*, or offering, to Ganesh, the elephant-headed Hindu deity responsible for good beginnings. The *puja* may include fresh flowers; rice or other grain signifying fertility; and *ghee*, or purified butter, which is thought of as fuel for the sacred fire, or *Agni*, that is central to the process.

The ceremony takes place under a *mandap*, or canopy, where the couple's parents assemble to wait for the bride. She is escorted to the *mandap* by an uncle or other male relative; in certain traditions, a white sheet is held between her and the groom until their hands are joined. The bride's parents may wash the couple's feet with milk and water, signifying purification. During the vows, the priest may wrap a thread or cord around and around the couple's joined hands, signifying the strength of their bond. This binding may also take the form of a cord tied around couple's shoulders, or the bride's dress may be pinned to the groom.

While the priest recites verses, the couple and family members put rice and similar offerings into the fire. Afterwards, the couple walks together around the fire multiple times, pledging their vows. As the couple departs the ceremony their car may crush a coconut placed under one of its tires by the priest, to ensure that their vehicle is capable of the journey.



Naming Ceremony and First Rice Ceremony

By the age of one, most children growing up in Hindu households will have experienced two important rituals: the naming ceremony, or *namakarana*, and the first rice ceremony, or *annaprashan*. These two rituals are among the 16 rites considered central to Hinduism.

Choosing a name for one's child is an important decision for Hindu families; it is thought that a child's name can influence his temperament and his prospects for the future. The number of letters in a name, and its meaning, receive a great deal of consideration. Perhaps because of the confusion surrounding his "good" name, or the missing letter from Ashima's grandmother that contains suggested names for the baby, Gogol's naming ceremony is not part of *The Namesake*.

Gogol is given his *annaprashan* at six months, and his younger sister Sonia undergoes hers at seven months. The word *annaprashan* translates literally as "food eating" or "grain initiation." This ritual is typically held in even months of age for boys, and odd months of age for girls, at a time prior to the child's first birthday. It signifies his or her transition to solid food. Conducted with the assistance of a priest, either at home or at a temple, the ceremony includes a formal outfit (sometimes including a crown) for the infant, a ceremonial feeding from a maternal uncle or grandfather, and a multi-course meal for the adults in attendance.

The priest or other officiant will first conduct a *puja*, or offering, for the baby's health and well

being. Then the maternal uncle or grandfather—in Gogol's case, a family friend—holds the child, while he is given a small taste of rice, or a rice pudding called *payesh*. Not every *annaprashan* will include as many separate courses for the baby as Gogol is given during his first rice ceremony; the most critical element is rice in one or more forms, due to its central role in Hindu cuisine and culture. Following the initial taste of rice from a family member, other guests at the ceremony may take a turn feeding the baby a small bit of rice or dal (bean stew), or a sweet. These feedings, more symbolic than nutritional, welcome the child into the larger community, and reinforce the importance of healthy food and virtuous living.

After all of these tastings are concluded, the baby will be shown a tray of objects—money or a piece of jewelry, a pen, a book, and a clump of soil. Which object(s) the baby reaches for are supposed to indicate his or her path in life. Reaching for the money or jewelry predicts wealth, the pen suggests success in business, the book academia, and the soil property ownership. At his naming ceremony, Gogol willingly tastes all the foods, but turns away crying from the tray, when "forced at six months to confront his destiny." Sonia, on the other hand, plays with the dirt, and almost puts the paper money in her mouth. What do these two different scenes reveal about the adults whom Gogol and Sonia will become?



The Taj Mahal

In *The Namesake*, Gogol and his family travel from Calcutta to Agra, in north central India, to see the Taj Mahal. Gogol, 15, is enormously moved by the architecture: “No other building he’s seen has affected him so powerfully.” He tries, and fails, to sketch portions of what he’s seen; it is possible that this early exposure to one of the world’s architectural marvels is part of the reason that Gogol grows up to be an architect.

The Taj Mahal, or Crown of Palaces, was built between 1632 and 1648 by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his third wife, Mumtaz Mahal, who died bearing the couple’s 14th child. Most readers will likely be familiar with the structure’s imposing white marble dome, and the formal reflecting pool in front of it, but the actual site spans more than 55 acres, and includes other buildings, elaborate gardens, subsidiary tombs, and an entire small town. The Mughal Empire ruled large sections of the Indian subcontinent for more than two centuries, and its architecture, containing Turkish, Persian, and Ottoman as well as indigenous Indian elements, is thought to have reached its highest expression in the Taj Mahal.

According to court records of the period, today’s familiar stories about the emperor’s great love for his wife have their basis in fact. Shah Jahan was so distraught after her death that he considered renouncing his worldly comforts and living in the desert as a hermit. But he was finally persuaded not to do so, for the sake of his children, and instead

focused his efforts on building the mausoleum that would be designed to mirror his deceased wife’s heavenly home. That it was also a great testament to the power and sophistication of his empire was surely an added benefit.

The Taj Mahal’s complex and varied architecture reflects its diverse, and occasionally conflicting, religious influences. Its minarets, each more than 130 feet tall, represent its more orthodox Islamic influences, while the trident shape incorporated into the dome’s main finial calls to mind the symbols for the Hindu god Shiva. In keeping with Islamic tradition, the bodies of Mumtaz (and eventually the emperor) were placed in a relatively unadorned crypt, with their faces turned toward Mecca. Even the way in which the buildings’ white marble captures and reflects light is interpreted as a metaphor for God as light.

The original formal gardens surrounding the Taj Mahal covered nearly 1,000 square feet. The garden space was divided into quarters, bordered by raised pathways, designed to evoke the four rivers of Paradise, flowing along cardinal directions.

At the end of the Mughal Empire, the Taj Mahal’s buildings fell into disrepair. It suffered some defacement at British hands during the nineteenth century, but was afterwards restored while the country was still under British rule. Now more than 350 years old, the Taj Mahal receives millions of visitors from around the world each year.

