

AP LITERATURE SUMMER READING:

Reading Lolita in Tehran by Azar Nafisi

And

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini

Please scroll down for discussion questions for *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

Reading Lolita in Tehran study guide for AP Literature

Directions

Notes on *Reading Lolita in Tehran* are not required, although they will help you to clarify and retain information in a way that will be useful for any in-class activities such as an essay or discussion. Additionally, your AP Literature teacher may choose to award extra credit to students who take notes.

Below is timeline provided by PBS Newshour:

1921 Reza Khan, a military officer in Persia's Cossack Brigade, names himself shah of Persia after successfully staging a coup against the government of the Qajar Dynasty. He immediately launches an ambitious campaign to modernize the country. Among other plans, he hopes to develop a national public education system, build a national railroad system and improve health care.

1925 Ahmad Shah, the Qajar dynasty's final ruler, is deposed, and an assembly votes in Reza Khan (who had adopted the last name Pahlavi) as Persia's new shah.

1926 Reza Khan Pahlavi is crowned, marking the beginning of the Pahlavi Dynasty. The shah's eldest son, Mohammad Reza, is named crown prince.

1935 Persia is officially renamed Iran. By the mid-'30s, Reza Khan's dictatorial approach begins to cause dissent.

1941 Although Reza Khan declares Iran a neutral power during World War II, Iran's British-controlled oil interests are largely maintained by German engineers and technicians, and Khan refuses to expel German citizens despite a request by Britain. In September 1941, following British and Soviet occupation of western Iran, Reza Shah is forced out of power. His son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, succeeds him on the throne.

1949 An attempt on the shah's life, attributed to the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party, results in an expansion of the Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's constitutional powers.

1951 Nationalist Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq attempts to nationalize the British-owned oil industry. The shah opposes Mossadeq and removes him from power, but he regains power and the shah leaves Iran.

1953 The shah returns to Iran when Gen. Fazlollah Zahedi — with backing from the Central Intelligence Agency — overthrows Mossadeq in an August coup d'etat.

1957 According to the Federation of American Scientists, U.S. and Israeli intelligence officers work with Iran to set up SAVAK, an Iranian intelligence organization later blamed for the torture and execution of thousands of political prisoners and violent suppression of dissent.

1963 The shah implements “The White Revolution,” an aggressive campaign of social and economic Westernization that is met with intense popular opposition. Popular nationalist Ayatollah Khomeini is arrested in one of many crackdowns on the shah’s opponents. By the late 1960s the shah relies regularly on SAVAK to quell dissidence.

1976 In one of a series of reforms that alienate his people, the shah replaces the Islamic calendar with an “imperial” calendar, beginning with the founding of the Persian Empire. Many of the shah’s growing number of critics see this as anti-Islamic.

1978 Iranians resort to rioting, mass demonstrations and strikes to protest the shah’s authoritarian rule. In response, he enforces martial law.

1979

January 16 The shah flees Iran amid intensifying unrest.

February 1 Islamic nationalist Ayatollah Khomeini returns from France, where he was exiled for his opposition to the shah’s regime. He encourages the brewing revolution.

April 1 Under Ayatollah Khomeini’s guidance, Iran declares itself a theocratic republic guided by Islamic principles, and a referendum is held to name it the Islamic Republic of Iran.

November 4 Islamic students storm the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, taking hostage 52 American employees and demand that the shah return from receiving medical treatment in the United States to face trial in Iran. Ayatollah Khomeini applauds their actions. The hostage situation ignites a crisis between the United States and Iran.

1980

April Iran and the United States sever diplomatic ties over the hostage crisis, and the U.S. Embassy becomes a training ground for the Revolutionary Guards Corps.

July The shah dies in exile in Egypt.

September Iraq invades Iran after years of disagreements over territory, most notably the Shatt al Arab waterway. When Iraqi President Saddam Hussein announces his intention to reclaim the Shatt al Arab, an eight-year war breaks out.

1981 Following negotiations mediated by Algeria, the U.S. hostages are released after 444 days of captivity.

1985 The United States covertly seeks to sell arms to Iran in exchange for the release of seven American hostages being held by Iranian-backed militants in Lebanon, prompting the Iran-Contra scandal.

1988

July An American navy ship, the USS Vincennes, shoots down an Iranian civilian plane, killing all 290 passengers and the crew. The United States later apologizes and agrees to financial compensation for the victims families, saying the civilian plane was mistaken for an attacking military jet.

August Iran accepts United Nations Security Council Resolution 598, leading to a cease-fire in the Iran-Iraq War.

1989

February Indian author Salman Rushdie's book "The Satanic Verses" causes uproar among fundamentalist Muslims, and Ayatollah Khomeini places a fatwa (religious edict) on the writer, saying his book is "blasphemous against Islam." The ayatollah calls on all "zealous Muslims" to kill Rushdie, placing a \$3 million bounty on his head.

June Khomeini dies. An elected body of senior clerics — the Assembly of Experts — chooses the outgoing president of the Islamic Republic, Ali Khamenei, to succeed Khomeini as the national religious leader.

August Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, the speaker of the National Assembly, becomes president. Rafsanjani was an influential member of the Council of Revolution of Iran in the Islamic Republic's early days.

1993 Rafsanjani wins reelection.

1995 The United States places oil and trade sanctions on Iran, accusing the country of sponsoring terrorism, committing human rights abuses and seeking to sabotage the Arab-Israeli peace process.

1997 (Ali) Mohammad Khatami-Ardakani is elected to the presidency in a landslide victory amidst his pledges of political and social reforms as well as economic revitalization.

2001 President Khatami wins reelection.

2000 Pro-reform candidates and allies of President Khatami win 189 of the 290 seats in parliament, setting the stage for reformers to control the legislature for the first time since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Conservatives win 54 seats, independents 42 and another five seats are reserved for religious minorities.

2002 In his January State of the Union speech, American President George W. Bush refers to Iran as part of an "axis of evil," saying the country is actively pursuing weapons of mass destruction. The speech is met with anger in Iran. Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi responds by calling President Bush's comments "arrogant" and saying Iran sees them as "interference in its internal affairs."

2003 The International Atomic Energy Agency says Iran admits to plutonium production, but the agency says there is no evidence that Iran is developing nuclear weapons. Iran agrees to more rigorous U.N. inspections of nuclear facilities.

2004 Conservatives reclaim control of Iran's parliament after controversial elections that were boycotted by reformists. Iran's government says it will consider re-starting its nuclear program.

2005 Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the hardline Islamic mayor of Tehran, who campaigned as a champion of the poor and pledged to return to the values of the revolution of 1979, defeats one of Iran's elder statesmen in presidential elections.

2006 Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sends a letter to President Bush calling for ways to ease tensions over Iran's nuclear program, but continues to defy U.N. deadlines to halt uranium enrichment activities. Ahmadinejad insists the nuclear program is for civilian energy purposes only.

2007 Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visits the United States, and accuses Israel of occupation and racism during a speech to the U.N. General Assembly.

The United States announces new economic sanctions against Iran targeted to impact the country's military and halt Tehran's disputed nuclear program.

A U.S. National Intelligence Estimate report finds that Iran stopped developing nuclear weapons in 2003, but continues to enrich uranium and could still develop atomic arms in the future.

2008 The International Atomic Energy Agency releases a report saying Iran's suspected research into the development of nuclear weapons remained "a matter of serious concern." European Union nations agree to impose new sanctions against Iran.

2009 Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is declared the landslide victor in presidential elections, sparking protests by supporters of candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, who unsuccessfully appealed the results to Iran's Guardian Council.

Lolita

1. 3-26

In this section, Nafisi focuses on Nabokov, specifically *Lolita* and *Invitation to a Beheading*. She also introduces her secret literature class and the students who attend it. Note that the students are not "real" in that she has had to change their names and many identifying details. Additionally, note that her students are not religiously, politically, or ideologically similar, but do share a love of literature. Finally, note that this is not a "book club."

Nafisi repeats the warning "*do not, under any circumstances, belittle a work of fiction by trying to turn it into a carbon copy of real life; what we search for in fiction is not so much reality but the epiphany of truth*" (3). What does this mean? What is the difference between "reality" and "truth"? Why does Mashid experience loneliness related to wearing the scarf before *and* after the revolution? How is Scheherazade different from the other women in *A Thousand and One Nights*? Why is it important that she uses "imagination and reflection" instead of "physical force"/violence (19)? What is your definition of *upsilamba*? What is *poshlust*? Explain the connection between Nafisi's secret class and her statement "I could invent the violin or be devoured by the void" (refer to the end of the section for clues too) (25).

2. 26-47

Note Nafisi's ironic tone when she talks about groups like the Blood of God and the Party of God. She clearly does not think that truly pious men would attack or humiliate women. She again touches on the

difficulty of finding one's true identity (particularly for women) when identity is forced onto her by others, particularly the state. Nafisi introduces us to an important, but anonymous, person in her life, her "magician." Note that he is a real person, but she introduces him in a way that makes him seem like a fictional character.

Look up solipsism; then incorporate the word into your explanation of Nafisi's claim about "the desperate truth of *Lolita*" (not his physical and sexual abuse of Lolita) (33). This is also addressed on page 37. Why does Nafisi introduce her magician in a way that makes him seem fictional? How does Humbert get the reader on his side? The translation of the Baudelaire on page 44 is "Hypocrite reader, --my twin, --my brother!" Why does Nafisi include this? (This is important and will come up again in the Austen section.)

3. 48-77

Nafisi reinforces the thematic claim that she is setting up about what makes a villain in fiction (and, perhaps, real life). She describes the discussions that "her girls" have about morality, being caught between change and tradition, and their own feelings. Note that, although her students don't always agree or get along, her secret class allows them to see "ourselves, for once, in our own image" (57). Nafisi includes descriptions of abuses of power, from Negar's schoolmate to the raid on her family's house to Sanaz's arrest. In doing so, she reminds readers that everyone is guilty under the rule of "the arbitrary...totalitarian regime" (67).

Why does she thank the Islamic Republic for ham-and-cheese-sandwiches? Who can eat a chicken after a man has had sex with it? Why does Nafisi include this information? What is "the only way to leave the circle, to stop dancing with the jailer" (77)?

Gatsby

4. 81-104

It is not immediately clear, but Nafisi is now writing about a different time period (remember, this text is structured around books and authors, not chronology). She is telling you about returning to Tehran after going to school in Europe and America. Then, she goes into depth about living in Norman, Oklahoma with her first husband. It is during this time that the Iranian revolution happens and the Islamic Republic starts to get established; thus, Nafisi returns to a very different Tehran than the one she left. She also starts teaching. Note that (and this has repeated itself throughout history) the fundamentalist totalitarian leaders view schooling and intellectuals as threats to their power. This time period was marked by the ascent of religious fundamentalists to power, but there were still opposing sides and jockeying for power.

Why were public mourning events marked by "desperate, orgiastic pleasure" (90)? Look up the word "morality." How does the dictionary definition relate to the Adorno quotation "The highest form of morality is not to feel at home in one's own home" (94)? (This is an important concept, ask if you are confused.) Bijan (Nafisi's second and current husband) says "we all helped create this mess, we were not doomed to have the Islamic Republic" (102). What do you think about his statement? What responsibilities does the individual have in terms of ensuring a just government?

5. 104-137

This section opens with a description of the occupation of the American Embassy in Tehran. (Have you seen *Argo*? This is that event.) This description both roots the text in an historical moment and gives an opportunity Nafisi to introduce an important element of her text: Iranians' views on and beliefs about America. These understandings often framed the U.S. as either a paradise or hell; thus they were misunderstandings of our complex and nuanced country. Fittingly, she focuses on *The Great Gatsby* in this section, a book that is as misread and misunderstood as the country it takes place in. Perhaps this is why she decides to put the novel on trial. Consider Mr. Nyazi's heinous misreading of the novel, as well

as Zarrin's flawless defense of it. Pay particular attention to her discussions of morality, democracy and empathy.

What is the difference between citizens of "ancient countries" and Americans (109)? Pay attention to Nafisi's instructions on how to read a novel (111). Is this similar or different to how you have been taught to read fiction? On the same note, reread the passage on page 118 "It is only through literature...from becoming too ruthless." Does this reflect what your English teachers have taught you? (Also, think of Atticus' remark to Scout about walking around in someone else's skin.) Another definition of morality comes from Zarrin in her defense of *Gatsby*. What do you think of this definition? What books would you consider "moral" by this definition? What does Nafisi mean when she says good novels are "democratic" (132)?

6. 137-153

Nafisi tells us about the legendary Professor R: who he was, the circumstances under which he resigned from the university. (It should be clear that you already know who he is, but if you can't figure it out, ask!) She goes on to describe finishing *Gatsby* with her class, and offers a beautiful analysis of the novel, particularly the end. Finally, she goes on to describe two previously unthinkable changes: universities being closed and women being forced to wear the veil.

What is Nafisi's primary issue with the veil? Students tend to like this section of the book the most, because they have actually read *Gatsby*. Further, in reading this section, they often discover they may have missed some elements of the novel the first time around. How does this section make you rethink *The Great Gatsby*?

James

7. 157-182

It comes as a surprise to many Americans to learn that Iran and Iraq were at war with one another for eight years. This section describes that time period, focusing on the way the new regime used the war to further oppress and hurt its own citizens. Nafisi also focuses on the work and life of Henry James who, as you will remember, was alive for two notable wars. This section, however, focuses almost entirely on the experiences of Nafisi and her friends and family. She describes what it was like to become a mother, as well as the beginning of her friendship with the magician.

Why were women told to dress properly when sleeping (160)? What does Nafisi mean when she says "Laleh and I, in refusing to accept that ideal, were taking not a political stance but an existential one" (165)? Why do you think that wearing the veil makes Nafisi feel violated? The Nietzsche (pronounced neet-cha) quotation on page 180 is one of my favorites. What does it mean to you?

8. 183-206

After describing her uneasy return to university teaching and the terror of life in a country at war, Nafisi returns to her analysis and celebration of fiction. Books are both a security blanket for her and an opportunity to think about something other than reality. Note, in her account of the note pushed under her office door, Nafisi's different definitions of the words "adulterous" and "liberal." Pay attention to the focus of her class and her discussion of fictional heroines on pages 194-5.

Why do "people like Ghomi always attack" (198)? What is the point of the "chair trick" described on pages 198-9 and how does it connect to "The Danger of a Single Story"? What is "a perfectly equipped failure" (202)? Do you know people who are PEFs? Why was everyone so excited about a complex, difficult to understand Russian film?

9. 207-235

Nafisi makes it clear that the Iranian government essentially abandoned its citizens during the war, claiming that they, Iranian citizens, wanted to be martyred (to die for one's beliefs). Nowhere is this more stark than in her description of "human wave" attacks (208). Note how drastically James was changed by WWI, but also how strongly he believed in continuing to feel, even in the face of pain. Pay attention to the anecdote about Razieh's defense of the girls who regurgitated Nafisi's lectures instead of writing their own thoughts. "The Kid" is a member of the Baha'i faith, and thus obviously not a Muslim. Note how Nafisi connects her claims about heroes and villains in fiction to the real-life struggles of the magician and his friend. Finally, note the ironies in the last part of this section: the way that the war brought a strange freedom to citizens of Tehran, the way that the government tried to control imagination.

The dead student described by Nassrin and the other young women sounds monstrous, yet Nafisi criticizes them for celebrating his death. Nassrin and Nafisi go on to exchange stories about acts of horrific cruelty and brutality. Why do you think Nassrin and Nafisi have different beliefs about how to react? What do you think about the James quotation that starts with "Feel, feel I say..." (215)? What "single quality" does Catherine Sloper have that makes her a heroine? And what trait marks "the villain in modern fiction" (224)? What books have you read that reflect this?

10. 235-253

Even though the war ends, things are still terrible in Iran; furthermore, things do not improve even after Ayatollah Khomeini (the "supreme leader" of Iran) dies. Mull over the line "It takes courage to die for a cause, but also to live for one" (249).

Why does her daughter shout that Khomeini "is not dead!" (242). Note the discussion that Nafisi and her students are having when they are interrupted by the young man who sets himself on fire. Why might she juxtapose these two ways of looking at courage? What doesn't Nafisi know about this young man? Why does this upset her?

Austen

11. 257-283

In the opening paragraphs, the women play with the famous opening line of *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." In this section Nafisi will note the thematic importance of Austen's work, but also how the conditions of Iranian women are similar to (or worse than) the way women were treated centuries ago.

Nafisi calls Islamic feminism a "myth" and a "contradictory notion" (262). I doubt that most of us have enough knowledge about Islam to agree or disagree, but take a moment to consider what you think feminism is. Additionally, Nafisi describes life in post-Khomeini Iran, as well as points out the regime's inability to create art and/or culture. She connects this to why the government might be so threatened by novels like Austen's. (Next page for questions.)

Why are the inability to dance and participate in dialogue the markers of "the most unsympathetic characters" in Jane Austen novels (268)? How are her novels democratic? Why did Austen ignore politics (according to the magician, quoting Nafisi to herself)?

12. 283-301

Nafisi describes what "dating" is like for young women like Yassi and Sanaz. She also describes the various conversations she and her students have about whether to stay in Tehran or leave.

The poem that Nahvi gives Mitra is by e. e. cummings, one of the creators of modernist poetry. Reread it, it is beautiful and suggestive. Nassrin formally announces that she has a boyfriend, although she does not seem particularly happy about it. They go on a double date to the worst concert ever.

Who makes the best arguments for staying? Leaving? Why? What connection between Mr. Nahvi and Elizabeth Bennet does Nafisi make? How does Nassrin respond when Nafisi asks her if she is happy?

13. 301-320

Nafisi reflects on being a woman, as well as the what “her girls” have been taught about love and relationships. Speaking of love and relationships, pay attention to the claims she makes at the end of section 14 about why novels about getting married can be considered democratic.

Nafisi goes on to talk specifically about Iranians who were murdered by the regime, as well as those who survived. Nafisi continues to argue about and discuss leaving with Bijan, her students, and the magician.

What does Manna mean when she says she has “never imaginatively experienced love in a Persian context” (302)? How can novels about getting married can be considered democratic? What is “the ordeal of freedom” (311)? How does the soul survive? What does this mean to you?

14. 320-343

Nassrin comes to Nafisi to talk about relationships again. Note how men are also denied full humanity by the government, even if they have more power than women. Nafisi and her students continue to talk about themselves; note how difficult it is for them to determine their identities.

Nafisi says goodbye to her students and to the magician.

Don't forget to read the epilogue.

What does Nassrin miss about jail? Why is Mitra angry when she returns from Syria? What article does Nafisi fantasize has been added to the Bill of Rights? What do you think about this claim?

Now that you have finished the book, take some time to reflect on it. How has Nafisi changed, challenged, or supported the way you think about reading fiction? What did you learn from reading this book?

A Thousand Splendid Suns Study Questions

Directions: No written work is required, though you will be asked to write about the novel during the first part of the semester. While reading *Homegoing*, ponder the following questions (courtesy of penguinrandomhouse.com):

-The phrase “a thousand splendid suns,” from the poem by Saib-e-Tabrizi, is quoted twice in the novel – once as Laila’s family prepares to leave Kabul, and again when she decides to return there from Pakistan. It is also echoed in one of the final lines: “Miriam is in Laila’s own heart, where she shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns.” Discuss the thematic significance of this phrase.

-Mariam’s mother tells her: “Women like us. We endure. It’s all we have.” Discuss how this sentiment informs Mariam’s life and how it relates to the larger themes of the novel.

-By the time Laila is rescued from the rubble of her home by Rasheed and Mariam, Mariam's marriage has become a miserable existence of neglect and abuse. Yet when she realizes that Rasheed intends to marry Laila, she reacts with outrage. Given that Laila's presence actually tempers Rasheed's abuse, why is Mariam so hostile toward her?

-Laila's friendship with Mariam begins when she defends Mariam from a beating by Rasheed. Why does Laila take this action, despite the contempt Mariam has consistently shown her?

-Growing up, Laila feels that her mother's love is reserved for her two brothers. "People," she decides, "shouldn't be allowed to have new children if they'd already given away all their love to their old ones." How does this sentiment inform Laila's reaction to becoming pregnant with Rasheed's child? What lessons from her childhood does Laila apply in raising her own children?

-At several points in the story, Mariam and Laila pass themselves off as mother and daughter. What is the symbolic importance of this subterfuge? In what ways is Mariam's and Laila's relationship with each other informed by their relationships with their own mothers?

-One of the Taliban judges at Mariam's trial tells her, "God has made us different, you women and us men. Our brains are different. You are not able to think like we can. Western doctors and their science have proven this." What is the irony in this statement? How is irony employed throughout the novel?

-Laila's father tells her, "You're a very, very bright girl. Truly you are. You can be anything that you want." Discuss Laila's relationship with her father. What aspects of his character does she inherit? In what ways is she different?

-Mariam refuses to see visitors while she is imprisoned, and she calls no witnesses at her trial. Why does she make these decisions?

The driver who takes Babi, Laila, and Tariq to the giant stone Buddhas above the Bamiyan Valley describes the crumbling fortress of Shahr-e-Zohak as "the story of our country, one invader after another... we're like those walls up there. Battered, and nothing pretty to look at, but still standing." Discuss the metaphorical import of this passage as it relates to Mariam and Laila. In what ways does their story reflect the larger story of Afghanistan's troubled history?

-Among other things, the Taliban forbid "writing books, watching films, and painting pictures." Yet despite this edict, the film *Titanic* becomes a sensation on the black market. Why would people risk the Taliban's violent reprisals for a taste of popcorn entertainment? What do the Taliban's restrictions on such material say about the power of artistic expression and the threat it poses to repressive political regimes?

-While the first three parts of the novel are written in the past tense, the final part is written in present tense. What do you think was the author's intent in making this shift? How does it change the effect of this final section?

