

Teaching Tip



Moon Palace

Tips on teaching the novel

Here are some tips and ideas on how to teach **Moon Palace**. For more information on how to organise your lessons, you might like to look at my **Moon Palace Teacher's Guide** (Klett 3-12-573822-9), which contains useful photocopyable material as well as an overhead transparency of Blakelock's painting **Moonlight**.

- This novel is too complex to be read by students on their own. On the other hand, it is also too long to be taught bit by bit in the classroom. Therefore, it is a good idea to start reading the novel together, moving along very slowly and carefully. You should point out some of the most important leitmotifs to your students – this is not very difficult since Auster 'says it all' within the first couple of pages. Also, it is essential to concentrate on the character of the narrator: it is necessary to examine his childhood, his family, his name, and how he is characterised by the people around him. Once students begin to see what the book is all about, ask them to read increasing sections of the novel on their own. Make sure that you include some time for revision of important sections in your lessons so you can check that everyone in class understands what is going on in the book. At the same time, everyone in class should be given a special topic to concentrate on as they read. Then, at the end of your lessons on *Moon Palace*, students can give a short talk on their special topic. Examples of these special topics are 'lost chances in *Moon Palace*', 'fatherhood', 'the moon', 'loss and gain', etc. .
- Since this novel is complex, it must be dealt with carefully in the classroom. Otherwise, certain problems might occur. For example, you will probably tend to forget what exactly has happened and when; the result may be that you expect your students to know about certain events that will only be explained much later in the novel. As well, you and your students will want to refer back to particular quotes from the novel but won't be able to say where exactly they have read them. Both problems can be overcome by keeping a reading log (refer to the section 'Organising students' material'), or by typing important quotes into a PC with the relevant page numbers. As well, try if possible to arrange your lessons in such a way that the students themselves can actually 'experience' episodes mentioned in the novel (refer to the section 'A lesson in the park'). It is also a good idea at the beginning of lessons to give students an idea as to which elements and topics they will deal with (without giving too much away, of course!). There are a large number of topics that you can concentrate on while teaching *Moon Palace*. Generally speaking, these fall into two categories: **a)** stylistic elements within the novel itself and **b)** historical, societal and philosophical aspects. Here are a few useful categories to concentrate on:
 - the author and his work • *Moon Palace*: plot, subplot, structure • the characters: their personalities and lifestyles • the language in *Moon Palace* • humor • settings and locations • the role of art in the novel: (writing, painting, telling stories) • chance and coincidence • Postmodernism • historical background (frontier and moving west, the 60's, Vietnam, etc.) • the quest for identity • family roles • Does the novel have a moral?

Getting started

- A nice way to start teaching the novel is to bring along a big box filled with the copies of *Moon Palace*. Tell your students that there are loads of different books in this box, but don't show them the books right away. Encourage your students to think of reasons why books are written. Then ask the class to draw up criteria with which these books might be differentiated (time, period in which the story takes place, narrator, plot, genre etc.). Finally, tell them that these books are biographies and invite them to speculate on why people write about their lives. Then hand out the copies to your students. When reading the opening passages of *Moon Palace*, they will recognise Marco's 'resourcefulness' and perhaps think about MS Fogg's reason for telling his story as well.

Auggie Wren's Christmas Story

- If you happen to teach this novel around Christmas, make sure you include *Auggie Wren's Christmas Story*, also by Paul Auster, in your schedule. This story is online at <http://www.whysanity.net/monos/smoke.html>. There are wonderful parallels between *Moon Palace* and this story, and besides – it is one of the best Christmas stories I know!

Using cartoons

- Some motifs of the novel are often depicted in cartoons, e.g. fatherhood or accidents and death. Such cartoons could be used to start your discussion of one particular passage of the novel, or to revise a section you have already covered. For one particularly suitable example, refer to the issue of *The Economist*, June 9, 2001 (p. 52), where you see some people queuing up in front of the 'Pearly Gates' (the entrance to heaven). Just before the entrance there is a newsstand: one of the people waiting to get in has just bought a paper, looks into it and says: "I can't believe they made such a mess of my obituary". As part of the media coverage on the topical debate of cloning and genetic engineering there are a number of cartoons that allude to the ideas of 'fathers', 'scientists', in vitro fertilisation etc.

Comparing Auster's original with the translation

- The German translation of *Moon Palace* is called *Mond über Manhattan*. This German text should be available from any library – or from your students, who might be reading the translated text anyway (don't encourage this, however!).
 1. Choose a passage of the original text that you'd like to discuss and that you feel is fairly difficult as far as language is concerned. Ask students to translate this section from English into German, and then have them look at the German translation. How does this vary from their work?
 2. Alternatively, split the class into various groups and assign a number of sections of the text for them to translate. Have the groups exchange each other's translations and talk about them. Then, have them compare their translations with those from *Mond über Manhattan*. Have your students discuss what they agree and disagree with in this 'official' translation.
 3. Finally, some groups could translate passages from German into English and other groups translate the result back into German. Have them discuss what happens during this process. Students should now be able to discuss this passage in detail, since they will be very familiar with the text.

A lesson in the park

- In chapter 2, Marco writes about his life in Central Park. Don't teach this chapter in the classroom, but rather take your students outside, if possible during a double lesson. If there isn't a public park near your school, the schoolyard will do. An especially effective (and spooky) idea is to invite your students for an afternoon of *Moon Palace* films and then have your tour in the park as it is getting dark. The aim of your lesson is to make the students realize (and to a certain extent experience) what Marco's life in the park must have been like.

Prepare various 'stops' where you read sections from the novel to the students, where you listen to music from a 'ghetto-blasters', or have students act out some scenes. Choose appropriate settings to go with what is described in the book – a bench, a bush, a bin. The stops should be as varied as possible to encourage students to use their senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting). If you like, prepare a 'bin bag' and drop it into a bin in the park. Invite your students to eat something from the 'cylindrical restaurant'. Use your imagination (and various props) to introduce a variety of characters (policeman, madman, people having a picnic, people giving Marco money, etc.) into the scene. Students can be given a number of different tasks to complete while on their trip through the park. For more complicated tasks it is useful to give students role cards that they can study for homework beforehand. At the end of the lesson(s), pair students off and have them interview each other on their life in the park. Homework: have them write this interview for magazine XY.

A book on tape

- Unfortunately here is no film version or book on tape of *Moon Palace*. However, since a large part of the novel deals with how we experience various forms of art, or what it feels like to listen to stories or have books read to one, it makes sense to incorporate this apparent lack of material into our teaching strategy:
 1. Either get together with other teachers at your school and tape parts of the novel, or ask a native speaker (language assistant) to read a number of sections aloud.
 2. Alternatively, assign one section of the novel to each student in your class. Their task is to check the pronunciation of words they don't know, practise reading their passages, then read the section aloud and tape it. These tapes can then be used in class to talk about the plot development of the novel and to revise important and/or difficult passages before an exam.

Organising students' material

- While studying this complex novel, students should always be encouraged to keep their own reading log. They might like to write down what they thought or felt after reading a particular section of the novel. Apart from this, students should also collect information on a number of topics and take notes to help them keep up with the often confusing plot. Character sheets on which to jot down new information about the various characters are also essential. A very nice idea is to use inexpensive photo albums (with about thirty pages) for these tasks. Sometimes these albums are even available with moon or star patterns! Students can use one section of the album for each topic, or use the album as a revision booklet, with questions on one side of the page and the answers on the back. In any case, these reading logs, booklets or albums should look as nice as possible!