

Study Guide for The Alchemist's Portrait

Character Creation

Photographs or portraits can be an excellent starting point for character creation exercises. Have the students create a character based on their impression of the person in the picture, complete with mannerisms and personality traits, family and friends, occupation and education, favourite food and drink, pets and hobbies - in short, anything that makes their character leap off the page and come to life for the reader.

The Art of Inspiration

Students select a piece of artwork and simply write a short story about it, based on their own perception of the picture they are studying. This creative thinking and writing exercise gives full reign to your students' imagination, no matter what form that may take.

Historical Eras

In the novel, Matthew's travels in time transport him to specific historical periods, which provide a host of great ideas for projects for students, such as the major dramatic events of the French and Russian revolutions and the American Civil War. Mathew's journey to Amsterdam in 1666 could also lead to studies into both the Flemish school of art as well as the era of the Dutch East India Company and other European trading empires following the age of discovery. There are a number of links to all these time periods, as well as to websites related to the history of alchemy, in the section dedicated to the historical background (http://www.simon-rose.com/history_alchemist.htm) of the novel.

Time Travel

In the novel, Matthew's method of traveling in time is a portrait frame, which transports him into the past. Have students create their own time travel machines, devices or methods, devising a way to travel back in time and return safely home again. One stipulation is that the method has to be plausible and fully explained, rather than simply being the person pressing a button or wishing to go back in time. The era to which they journey also has to have some significance to them and they should be able to explain why they would like to go there, rather than somewhere else in history.

Doorways and Portals

Imagine you are in the library searching for an elusive book, which could just be one you really want to read after someone's recommendation, or it could be a book you really need for a project. You have visited the school library many times, but you notice a strange door that you've never seen before. Plus something is compelling you to open that door and step through it. Where would it take you? The possibilities are endless.

Museums

Matthew's initial meeting with Peter Glimmer takes place at the local museum, which not only contains collections of paintings, but also ancient Egyptian artifacts, suits of armour and numerous historical objects from many different eras. Imagine after a school trip to a museum what you might use as a story starter, whether on a time travel theme or something else entirely, based on the students' favourite memories from their field trip?