

Literature Circle Guide to
LEON AND THE SPITTING IMAGE by Allen Kurzweil

Book Summary

Leon enters the fourth grade at the Classical School already carrying the label “poor fine motor skills” at a school with “nimble fingers make for nimble minds” as its motto. Now he’s faced with a very unusual teacher who seems obsessed with sewing and his inability to do it well. As if that wasn’t enough, Leon’s having trouble with Lumpkin, the class bully who revels in causing Leon pain and embarrassment. But if Leon is up against considerable challenges, he also has a lot on his side. He has his school friends, P.W. and Lily-Matisse, with whom he can commiserate and scheme. He has his mother and their friends at Trimore Towers, who keep him well fed and well loved. And now he has magical capabilities in the form of a doll that can control his unfriendly teacher. With so much on his side, Leon just might make it to fifth grade.

Author Information

Allen Kurzweil lives in Providence, Rhode Island, with his wife and son. He is the author of two critically acclaimed adult novels. He has won numerous awards for his work, including fellowships from the Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library, and the Guggenheim Foundation. He is a Fellow at Brown University's John Nicholas Brown Center. *Leon and the Spitting Image* is his first children's book.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. Where does Leon sleep the night before the first day of school? Why does he sleep there?

Leon’s mother works as the night manager at Trimore Towers, an unusual hotel. Leon and his mother also live there. On the night before his first day of school, Leon sleeps on two pushed-together leather armchairs because the hotel ice machine – known as the Ice Queen – is extremely noisy and is located right outside Leon’s room (p. 13).

2. Why does Leon keep a map of the world in his room? What does he use it for?

Leon’s mother gave him a map of the world for his ninth birthday. While taking a cab to school every day, Leon asks the cab driver where he or she is originally from. He then puts pushpins in his map to keep a record of all the places he’s “visited” through his cab driver interactions (p. 16).

3. Why is Miss Hagemeyer teaching her class sewing? How does Leon feel about it?

Leon’s new teacher tells her class, “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I make and I understand.” By teaching her class how to sew and tying all her lessons to sewing projects, Miss Hagemeyer hopes her students will learn on a deeper, more experiential level (pp. 27-29).

4. The motto of the Classical School is “nimble fingers make for nimble minds.” Do you agree or disagree? Why?

The Classical School places great emphasis on students physically participating in their learning. Leon recalls a former teacher “badgering him to stick his hands in Play-Doh and *feel* the squishiness.” While there is value in learning through doing, Leon experiences frustration because he is considered by his teachers to have “poor motor skills” (pp. 2-3).

5. Describe Leon and Lumpkin’s relationship. How do they treat each other? Why does Leon destroy Lumpkin’s unicorn?

Lumpkin is a classic school bully. He makes Leon’s life unpleasant by physically and verbally harassing him. While Lumpkin does not intimidate Leon, neither can he figure out a way to get out from under the assaults. Leon snips off Lumpkin’s unicorn’s horn and sews it back to “a new location where it absolutely did *not* belong” because Lumpkin humiliates him by forcibly applying a pair of their teacher’s old panty hose to his head (pp. 90-92).

6. Imagine you were Leon. How would you have handled Lumpkin? Would you have destroyed his unicorn? Why? Why not?

Lumpkin is in Leon’s class, so it’s virtually impossible for Leon to avoid the bully. While teachers witness some of Lumpkin’s aggressive behavior, most of it happens out of view of adults in charge. Students may suggest Leon could try talking to a trusted teacher – such as the gym teacher, Coach Kasperitis – and have him intervene. While the motivation for Leon’s lashing out at Lumpkin’s unicorn is understandable, students may observe it didn’t actually benefit Leon in terms of stopping Lumpkin’s attacks.

7. List all the ways that the Classical School is like your school. List all the ways it is different. Which school would you rather go to, and why?

Students may note similarities between Leon’s school and their own in that students participate in an end-of-year celebration day – for the Classical School, it’s Carnival. Also, the Classical School students have gym class, go on field trips, and endure pop quizzes. On the other hand, the Classical School’s motto “nimble fingers make for nimble minds” colors all of the learning experiences there. Students may also note, there are no teachers who use animal eyeballs as accessories in their school.

8. On page 109, Leon describes the Ice Queen: “She wasn’t at all like the one in the fairy tale, he decided. She wasn’t an evil witch. She was just a weird, cranky, out-of-date curiosity in need of special handling.” What does this mean about the Ice Queen? Could it be an insight into any other characters in the story? How?

Although the Ice Queen consistently interrupts Leon’s rest, he recognizes that instead of being a powerful and deliberate figure, his Ice Queen is really just an old, poorly installed machine. Likewise, when Leon gives his final “animile” to Miss Hagemeyer, he learns that his teacher isn’t a witch bent on Leon’s destruction, but rather she’s an eccentric teacher who does have the capacity to display vulnerability

and appreciation.

9. What role does luck play in Leon's life? What kind of "lucky" things happen to him during the course of the book? How do they change his experience of fourth grade? **Leon's luck tends to bring him simultaneous good and bad results. Although he experiences bad luck when Lumpkin attempts to ruin his final project, that experience turns into good luck when, as a direct result, Leon discovers the "animile's" secret power. Stumbling upon how to control his teacher through the doll made in her likeness seems to be tremendous good luck, but over time that feeling is lessened when what Leon desires to do most – humiliate Lumpkin – turns out to be the one type of control he cannot execute. Another example of Leon's mixed luck is his initial disappointment when cab driver Napoleon hails from Haiti, a country already represented in his travel book and on his world map, but that bad luck turns to good when Napoleon becomes an important friend and ally.**

10. What does the title of the book have to do with the story? Explain.

***Leon and the Spitting Image* refers to the spitting image, or perfect copy, of Miss Hagemeyer that Leon creates for his final project. But it also refers to the method Leon accidentally discovers for controlling Miss Hagemeyer's every move: activating the doll by accidentally splashing some of the coach's tobacco spit onto it (p. 155).**

11. What kind of "master piece" would you have created? Would you have been able to give it to the SOV project? Why? Why not?

Have students brainstorm different types of creatures they would like to sew. While the SOV project – Stitches of Virtue – provides the students' handmade toys to needy orphans around the world, some may feel they would not want to part with their "animile" (the medieval way Miss Hagemeyer refers to "animals") because they would want to give their project as a gift or possibly keep it for themselves.

12. How would Leon's life have been different if his father had been alive? How would his father's presence have changed the story?

Students may conjecture that Leon's life would have been easier if his father had not died in a fireworks accident. Perhaps Leon's family would not have lived at the Trimore, where Leon's mother must work nights and from which Leon is forced to take cabs to and from school every day. However, Leon and his mother have wonderfully supportive friends in the other staffers at the Trimore and Leon very much enjoys exploring geography through his daily cab rides.

13. Evaluate Miss Hagemeyer's sewing curriculum. Was it a good use of the children's time? Was it educational? Were the projects worth the time?

Throughout the year, the students spend much of their class time sewing. Miss Hagemeyer attempts to weave all other learning into the sewing projects. Have students consider the value Leon and his classmates received from all the sewing practice. Ask them to reflect on whether the students in Miss Hagemeyer's class covered as much material as they would have if their sewing projects were less of a priority. Have a class discussion about different creative approaches to learning.

14. What is Leon planning to make over the summer? What do you think of his plan? Explain.

Leon has a brainstorm after determining that controlling Miss Hagemeyer with a doll might also work with other people, namely Lumpkin, the class bully. Leon collects orange yarn for Lumpkin's hair and the other items he'll need to create his second spitting image. If he is successful, he'll be able to avoid being hurt or embarrassed by Lumpkin's attacks and he'll have the ultimate power to give Lumpkin a dose of his own medicine. While it's a rewarding plan as a fantasy, students may consider how this magical mischief may not fully address or solve Leon's problems with Lumpkin (pp. 294-300).

Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-5; Application: 6-7; Analysis: 8-10; Synthesis: 11-12; Evaluation: 13-14.

Activities

1. During the course of the school year, Leon has to cope with a difficult teacher and a class bully. In a group, discuss troubles you have had with people who have picked on you or others. What are some effective ways of dealing with bullies? How can you help other kids who are dealing with them?

Work as a class to make a list of the different ways bullies and other difficult people create problems. List items may include "name calling," "threats," and "physical violence." Then brainstorm positive steps that students can take against such intimidation, including "talk to a trusted adult," "speak up when someone else is being hurt," and "treat others as you wish to be treated." Collaborate to create a class charter that details acceptable and unacceptable behavior and how the students can work together to create a safe and healthy environment for all.

2. Can you create a spitting image of yourself? You can draw and paint it or make it a sculpture like Leon's. Don't forget to include all the important details--like panty hose and eyeballs!

Make class self-portraits with clay, markers, paint, crayons, pencils, and, of course, material, stuffing, and needle and thread. Add identifying details to make each creation unique. Display your masterpieces throughout the classroom or in the hall.

3. Learn the Seven Stitches of Virtue—boys and girls alike, just as in Miss Hagemeyer's class. You may want to invite in a teacher with some knowledge of sewing! Can you achieve five S.P.I.? Can you make a dinosaur or even a "masterpiece"?

Start by supplying students with a needle, thread, and a piece of scrap material to use to practice the stitches illustrated on page 44. Work toward a sewing project such as a snake, a simple dinosaur, or other "animile." Finally, have students use a ruler to measure their S.P.I. or stitches per inch.

