



Aloha, Mozart by Waimea Williams

Reader's Guide

I. Characters and Motivations

1. Before reading the novel, were you affected by what you knew about Hawaii and Salzburg?
2. Did your feelings about the characters and their motivations change?
3. How does music influence both major and minor characters? (Discuss the varieties of music in the story.)
4. What motivates Maile to pursue a career outside Hawaii?
5. What do we learn about her before she leaves for New York?
6. Explore Maile's relationship to her grandmother, her father, and Auntie Lani.
7. How do Maile's feelings about her family change after high school, after college?
8. Discuss the psychological influences of her multi-racial background.
9. Track Maile's emotional shifts as she studies with Madame Renska, then leaves for Europe.
10. In Salzburg, how is Maile motivated by her first impressions?
11. Compare her relationships with Karl, Professor Jann, and Werner von Wehlen. What defines each relationship?
12. How do these men see themselves? How do their views of Maile change?
13. Which characters are most fundamentally affected by their experiences?
14. What motivates Frau Metzger, the Rosenkavalier, the American Consul?
15. What do you admire or dislike about the characters? Does your opinion change over the course of the novel?
16. Do characters see themselves differently at the end of the story?

Literary writers strive to create characters and situations that offer insight into motivation, and show empathy for the human condition. This novel presents the “backstage view” of a musician’s life, and readers are invited to share its pleasures, to satisfy their curiosity and expand their knowledge. Beyond that, what is the author telling us talent, ambition and discipline? One’s freedom to choose a profession? Such questions are key to literature, along with recognizably human characters with both negative and sympathetic qualities. All of this is worth an in-depth discussion.

I. Issues and Themes

1. Discuss the importance of music to Maile as pleasure and comfort.
2. What does the novel show about music as a profession, as a spiritual force?
3. How does the title of the book encapsulate the story as a whole?
4. What role do religion and traditional values play in the novel?
5. Can professional musicians expect to have children and a good family life?
6. Is Madame Renska successful both as a teacher and as a human being?
7. Does Professor Jann represent the morality of art? If so, in what way?
8. Discuss Hawaiian vs. Austrian culture. How are class issues dealt with?
9. Could this novel have taken place elsewhere and been equally effective?
10. How does the issue of race affect Maile in Salzburg? Could she ever join high society?
11. Does Maile avoid the important issues of her time in favor of dedication to music?
12. Contrast her commitment and Karl’s. Compare each to the wealthy violinist Kazuo.
13. Is Nazism a thing of the past in the novel, or a lingering presence and a threat?
14. How does Maile deal with overcoming the horrors of a past that is not hers?
15. Which characters are corrupt, and why?
16. How do various characters equate music and passion, sexually and otherwise?
17. When faced with a Soviet invasion, which characters are motivated by their own need for survival?

Literary writers strive to create works that present moral dilemmas but avoid judging the actions of their characters. It is worth exploring how various characters face the issues that rule their lives. Further discussion could focus on what the author tells us about betrayal, failure, and redemption.

III. The Author’s Craft

1. How do the two epigraphs, in Hawaiian and in German, set the stage for the narrative?
2. The novel begins with children confused by and ridiculing opera. What does this foreshadow?

3. How does the first chapter establish the cultural setting and give a sense of place?
4. Does the writing have elements of magical realism, or is “exoticism” portrayed as true to life?
5. Discuss the use of an omniscient narrator.
6. The novel ranges from rural Hawaii to Waikiki hotels, to Manhattan, to Austria’s provincial capital, Salzburg. How does this broad canvas support the action and drive the narrative?
7. In what way do different locations illuminate the emotions and psychological makeup of the characters?
8. How are gender differences portrayed?
9. Do the stories of the characters parallel or diverge from one another?
10. In listening to music and performing it, how are negative and positive qualities described?
11. In what ways is music equated with love?
12. How do different characters react to Maile’s singing?
13. What scenes were the most memorable?
14. Which characters were the most unique?
15. What makes the story compelling?
16. What is the significance of the ending?

Literary authors strive to create works that have an internal logic not dependent on plot twists, coincidences, or surprises that conveniently resolve issues. The development of characters over time, and their passage through a story to its conclusion, must flow and be balanced in numerous ways: the amount of detail given, which action to describe fully as opposed to summarizing it, the length of scenes, the discarding of subplots that interfere. The success is all this is measured in how much readers are drawn into the story, believe what they read, and want to continue reading.