

Readers' Guide

The Journey of the Flame

Walter Nordhoff

Timeline

This timeline of notable events will help you put *The Journey of the Flame* in context.

- 1542 The first European to explore the California coast, Juan Rodriquez Cabrillo of Portugal gives San Diego its name.
- 1602 Sebastian Vizcaino discovers Monterey Bay and accurately charts the California coast.
- 1769 Present-day Alta and Baja California are claimed by Spain.
- 1775 Mexican commander Juan Bautista de Anza leads thirty soldiers and their families to settlements in Alta California.
- 1798 The fictional narrator of *The Journey of the Flame*, Don Juan Obrigón, is born.
- 1822 After the Mexican government throws off Spanish rule, California is claimed by Mexico.
- 1830 Nordhoff's paternal grandparents emigrate from Germany.
- 1846 The United States Army invades Mexico during the Mexican War.
- 1848 The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ends the Mexican War, ceding California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and parts of Nevada, Utah, and Colorado to the United States.
- 1850 California becomes the thirty-first state.
- 1855 Walter Nordhoff is born in Brooklyn.
- 1902 The narrator, Don Juan Obrigón, dies.
- 1933 *The Journey of the Flame* is published under the pseudonym Antonio De Fierro Blanco.
- 1937 Walter Nordhoff dies in Santa Barbara, California.

Questions to Discuss

1. Don Juan Obrigón claims to be the illegitimate son of an Irish king. How does this claim establish the tone for the rest of the novel? What other stories from Don Juan Obrigón's early childhood help you understand his character later in the novel?
2. Much of the novel consists of stories and aphorisms drawn from Don Obrigón's journey as a young child. Many of these seem to be intended to impart wisdom to readers, for example, "When drunk, you threaten your enemies. Therefore they kill you; or having shown your mind, you lose power to injure them" (p. 38). Is this aphorism still applicable? What other examples can you think of?
3. Many readers think Don Obrigón's journey embodies the American Dream. What do you think?
4. How are women—for example, Doña Isabella—presented by Don Juan Obrigón in the novel? What about other women? Do you think Nordhoff had any particular view of women's roles?
5. Don Juan Obrigón defines religion as "a sanctification of useful habit" (p. 43). What do you think Nordhoff wants us to think about religion?
6. What roles do myth, Obrigón's own youthful understanding of reality, and tradition play in the novel?
7. How are Californians portrayed throughout the novel, and how does this portrayal mesh with your own understanding of contemporary, multicultural California?
8. Don Obrigón defines love as that which "fills [his] soul" with mystery (p. 91), and he says the joy of life is fear. What do you think he means? Do you agree with his definitions? Why?
9. In the foreword Rebecca Solnit writes, "It is not hard to read Obrigón as a fantastic self-portrait of the blond outsider-aristocrat Walter Nordhoff" (p. xiv). Drawing on Solnit's discussion of Nordhoff's life, in what ways do you think Obrigón is like Nordhoff?

Suggested Reading

Martínez, Pablo L. *A History of Lower California*. Mexico: Libros Mexicanos, 1956.

Nordhoff, Walter. *The Journey of the Flame*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933.

Powell, Clark. *California Classics: The Creative Literature of the Golden State*. Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie, 1971.

Schoenherr, Allan A. *A Natural History of California*. London: University of California Press, 1992.