Contemporary Period
1945 to the Present
Orthodoxy and Resistance:  
Cold War Culture and Its Discontents  
The Beat Movement  
New Communities, New Identities, New Energies  
Vietnam Conflict  
Postmodernity and Difference: Promises and Threats

In Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, the unnamed narrator explains the method behind his circular narrative by declaring that “the end is in the beginning,” and in a way the three sections on contemporary literature bring us back to issues raised by the texts about the origins of America that open *The Heath Anthology*. The introduction to the section on “Native American Oral Literatures” suggests that the class consider the “creation stories” that students bring with them in order to come to some sense of that cultural construct we call “America.” Such a discussion questions how such stories are produced, by what groups of people, and for what purposes. Throughout the section introductions, this approach is described as an analysis of “cultural rhetoric”—the consideration of texts not as static artifacts with self-contained meanings but as strategic examples of what Jane Tompkins calls “cultural work”—the products of dynamic processes of cultural confrontation, negotiation, assimilation, and transformation. These processes include the printing and dispersal of these texts in *The Heath Anthology*, the revision of this anthology from edition to edition, the assignment of these texts in college classes, and the particular reading experiences of the students in the class taken as both individuals and as members of various communities. Such an approach demonstrates as well that since the study of the past involves the active creation of knowledge on the part of students and teachers, history becomes an active part of the present.

The study of recent culture reverses this equation as a part of the same pedagogical approach by regarding the present as part of history. The historical debates over the so-called “canon” of American literature can be illustrated for students by having them define a contemporary canon by themselves, an especially appropriate activity at the start of a new century. To do this, the class will have to consider what is meant by contemporary culture, how we define what is central, what is marginal, why we might want to undertake such definitions, and what the consequences of different definitions might be. The multiple editions anthology itself (as well as the class syllabus) can then be regarded as just one example of canon-building, complete with explanations and justifications of the choices made.
With regard to the section on contemporary literature in particular, discussion can center on the classification system used to organize these texts. If copies of the earlier editions of *The Heath Anthology* are handy, the class can compare how categories have been revised from one edition to the next and why. For example, both the second and third editions can be seen as grouping contemporary texts by decades—the fifties, the sixties (and the extension of the sixties into the seventies), and the eighties/nineties—under rubrics that highlight a particular historical interpretation of each decade: “Orthodoxy and Resistance: Cold War Culture and Its Discontents” (a subtle but significant revision of “The Cold War: Orthodoxy and Resistance” from the second edition); “New Communities, New Identities, New Energies”; “Postmodernity and Difference: Promises and Threats.” From another perspective, however, these titles are contemporaneous, not chronological—Joyce Carol Oates and John Updike from “Orthodoxy and Resistance” are primarily writers of the last three decades; Hisaye Yamamoto and Saul Bellow, while included in “New Communities, New Identities, New Energies,” are writers of the forties and fifties as well. All of the above suggests the complexity of cultural forces at work in contemporary society: the tension and sometimes dialectic between culture and counterculture (“Orthodoxy and Resistance”); the (re)emergence of multicultural literature following the liberation movements of the sixties (“New Communities, New Identities, New Energies”); the self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness of contemporary literature, including contemporary multicultural and counter-cultural literature (“Postmodernity and Difference: Promises and Threats”). The complexity of these issues also foregrounds the fact that all anthologies of literature, including *The Heath Anthology*, are not just chronicles of cultural change but active participants in that change.

Such an analysis naturally suggests inviting the class to construct their own textbook—their own canons—and to engage in the same operation of historicizing the present and near-present past by examining the associations students have in conjunction with terms like “the fifties,” “the sixties,” “the seventies,” “the eighties,” and now “the nineties.” Where do these associations come from? How are they perpetuated through the mass media and popular culture and for what ends? Political? Commercial? What other categories and groupings could we use to organize, read, and interpret the texts in this section? “Women Writers”? “The African-American Tradition”? “Poetic Experimentation”? This kind of pedagogical approach emphasizes multiculturalism as an activity, not an inert state of being, an activity that reads texts—all texts, not just texts by “ethnic” writers (as if it were possible for there to be “nonethnic” writers)—as complex, hybrid forms of discourse.

In a similar way, Gloria Anzaldúa developed the concept of “mestiza consciousness” primarily as a way of describing how her own complex identity as a multilingual, multinational lesbian Chicana writer taught her to “cope by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” by learning how to “juggle cultures.” She also implies, however, that such an experience is typical rather than exceptional, and that we are all to a greater or lesser extent juggling cultures as well, the difference being not between the pure and the mixed in terms of cultural identity, but between the conscious recognition of the complicated interrelationship of diverse cultural backgrounds and a kind of willful
innocence/ignorance of this diversity:

The struggle is inner: Chicano, indo, American Indian, Mojado, mexicano, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian—our psyches resemble the borderlands and are populated by the same people. The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the “real” world unless it first happens in the images in our heads. (87)

Anzaldúa’s reference to the outer terrains—the rhetorical space where these internal issues of cultural definition, resistance, and transformation are played out—serves well as a pedagogical coda to this instructor’s guide, reminding us that the point of cultural contestation or consensus, the site of struggle and mastery, doesn’t lie between the covers of any particular anthology, but takes place in what Louise Rosenblatt called the transaction between reader and text, a transaction that includes both the immediate historical context of the reader as well as that of the text. Whatever the particular selections made for any given class syllabus, the real focus of the class is that transaction—the “images in our heads” that constitute the internal terrain of American literature.

Bibliography


Orthodoxy and Resistance: Cold War Culture and Its Discontents

Arthur Miller (b. 1915)

Contributing Editor: Robert A. Martin

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Written and first produced for the 1953 drama season in New York, *The Crucible* continues to interest students for its witchcraft theme and setting in Salem, and for its more recent political association as a historical parable against the dangers of McCarthyism. While the latter issue has generally faded in the public mind, it was very much the issue when the play opened. The several layers of meaning—historical (witchcraft), political (McCarthyism and the activities of the House Un-American Activities Committee), and the ever-present approach to the play as stagecraft and theater—allow an instructor to open the play to a class probably not knowledgeable about any of the layers. I have found that such a class is quickly taken up to the level of the play. Miller has added a running commentary on the issues and personalities of Salem. It is important to point out that there is no character in the play “who did not play a similar—and in some cases exactly the same—role in history” (Arthur Miller in his “Note” on the historical accuracy of *The Crucible*).

The witch-hunt that occurred in Salem in 1692 resulted from a complex society at a turning point when the power of the Massachusetts theocracy was weakening. Reverend Parris was more representative of absolute church authority than Miller makes him out. Once the issues came into the open, he found that the whole “devilish” conspiracy needed wiser and more learned minds to uncover it, even if he was absolutely convinced of the reality of witchcraft. I usually begin a class by stating that at Salem on Gallows Hill in the spring of 1692, nineteen men and women were hanged; one man, Giles Corey, was pressed to death for standing mute; and two dogs were also hanged for witchcraft. The classroom then becomes a different place; the question of witchcraft, or how could those people have believed in it, brings out some interesting and fruitful ideas, discussions, viewpoints. Discussion of the play, however, should identify the McCarthyism parallels in a way that students can understand. Miller has said that the theme of the play is “the handing over of conscience to the state.” The question is not entirely a remote one, as almost any major newspaper or television exposé can make the issue clear to today’s students.
Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Central to this play, in addition to Miller’s theme stated above, is one of illusion versus reality. In a society that held a doctrinal belief in the power and reality of the devil to “overthrow God’s kingdom,” the powers of persuasion to see “specters” where there were none resulted in mass hysteria. When John Proctor, a born skeptic, challenges the illusion, he is subsequently brought down by the reality of his adultery. As the witch-hunt spread to eventually cause the arrest of prominent citizens, some form of common sense prevailed and the girls were silenced. The Salem hysteria has been investigated and researched widely, and many excellent sources are available. One recent theory proposed that the whole business was the result of ergot poisoning, a bacteria that produces hallucinations if wheat is stored for too long and is allowed to ferment. This, of course, was the theory of a modern-day scientist who also happened to be a graduate student. It was a neat and “scientific” solution to a very old question. Unfortunately, the whole theory collapsed when expert senior biologists looked at the idea closer and declared it bad science. Miller, possibly as a result of the play, was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1956 on the pretense of issuing him a passport. He was convicted of contempt of Congress for refusing to answer questions about the communistic connections of others. The decision was later reversed. Miller had in effect been convicted on the same principle as John Proctor—guilt by association—and like Proctor he refused to name others.

Original Audience

In the early 1950s there was something resembling a cohesive audience for serious plays. That audience was both shocked and fearful that the theme and subject of the play would unleash still further inquiries by the forces of McCarthyism. Reviewers, reflecting the mood of the audience, had several reactions. Some praised the acting, some thought it was a play without contemporary parallels, and others avoided the play’s obvious point altogether. The best way to understand the response by critics is to read their reviews in the 1953 volume of *New York Theatre Critics’ Reviews.*

Bibliography

Miller has written at length on the play and on the context of the time. The following are easily available sources I have my students use in their research. The first and probably most important are Miller’s comments in volume one of *Arthur Miller’s Collected Plays* (Viking, 1957), pp. 38–48. All of Miller’s essays are reprinted in my *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller* (Viking, 1978), including several comments made over the next several decades. An early work on *The Crucible* was (at the time) nicely
complete and informative for its comprehensive critical collection of essays on the play, the history behind it, and the context: *The Crucible: Text and Criticism* (Penguin, 1977, first published by Viking in 1971), ed. Gerald Weales. John H. Ferres edited a useful collection of essays on the play titled *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Crucible: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Prentice-Hall, 1972). Also of interest for its judicious selection of essays and an interview with Miller in 1979 in which many references and comments on *The Crucible* occur is *Critical Essays on Arthur Miller* (G. K. Hall, 1979), ed. James J. Martine. Somewhat of broader scope, but nevertheless useful for its international Miller bibliography by Charles A. Carpenter and a fine essay by Walter Meserve on *The Crucible* is *Arthur Miller: New Perspectives* (Prentice-Hall, 1982), ed. Robert A. Martin. My essay, “Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*: Background and Sources,” has proven of use to many students and scholars who seek to learn some of the connections between the play and Salem in 1692, and has been reprinted numerous times, most recently in *Essays on Modern American Drama* (University of Toronto Press, 1987), ed. Dorothy Parker, and in Martine’s *Critical Essays* noted above. I recommend that my students read selectively in *Conversations with Arthur Miller* (University of Mississippi Press, 1987), ed. Matthew C. Roudane. There are fifty-two page references listed in the index for *The Crucible*. Miller’s comments in conversations and interviews are frequently more enlightening than any other playwright in our history because he is articulate as well as theoretically sophisticated. Finally, a more recent account is *The Crucible: Politics, Property, and Pretense* (New York: Twayne Masterworks Series, 1993), by James J. Martine, which is one of the most complete and comprehensive studies of *The Crucible* to date. Martine is a well-known Miller scholar and his critical judgment is astute.

Tennessee Williams (1911–1983)

*Contributing Editor: Thomas P. Adler*

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students may tend to respond to the heroines, especially in Williams’s earlier plays up through the end of the 1940s, differently from what he intended because their value system is not the same. His sensitive, poetic misfits who escape from reality into a world of illusion/art are likely to seem too remote, too soft. The very things that Williams values about them—their grace, their gentility—nowadays may appear dispensable adjuncts of life in an age when competition and aggressiveness are valorized among both sexes. So students need to be sensitized to Williams’s romantic ideals and to what he sees as the civilizing, humanizing virtues.

It helps to place Williams in context as a southern dramatist, and also as one who propounds the feminizing of American culture as a counter to a society built on masculine ideals of strength and power. Students also need to understand that Williams is a “poetic” realist, not simply in his use of a
lyrical rhetoric but in his handling of imagery, both verbal and visual. If they attend carefully to his command of visual stage symbolism, they can oftentimes discover the necessary clues about Williams’s attitude toward his characters.

Any discussion of “Portrait of a Madonna” will necessarily focus upon Williams’s characterization of his sexually frustrated and neurotic heroine, whose upbringing in a succession of southern rectories, under the nay-saying and guilt-inducing “shadow” of the church and of the cross, has left her totally unprepared for life and prey to crazed delusions. Miss Collins becomes almost the archetypal unmarried daughter, restricted by the responsibility of caring for an aged mother, sensing the social pressure to be sexual and yet denied any morally sanctioned expression of these feelings, finally forced into madness as a result of unrealistic expectations. The image of the Madonna and Child becomes central to an understanding of the play: the Virgin and Mother whom Lucretia costumed for the Sunday School Christmas pageant; the children she visits twice a year on religious holidays with her scrapbooks of Campbell soup kids; Richard’s many children; the fabricated “child” to be born of a woman virginal in body and heart, defiled only in her dreams.

Brief though it is, Williams’s play is amenable to many critical approaches other than the psychological and feminist. A formalist approach might examine the way in which Williams structures his play—as he later will Streetcar—around a series of dichotomies: past/present; memory/fact; gentility/brutality; shadow/light; sanity/insanity; freedom/repression; vir- ginal/defiled; harmless illusion/harmful delusion. A literary-historical approach could place the work within the tradition of southern gothicism, while a sociocultural framework could explore the way in which the myth of southern chivalry curtails Lucretia’s independence, as well as the way in which utilitarian technology threatens the artistic sensibility (elevator cage as machine played off against the music on the gramophone). A generic approach might consider the possibilities for seeing the play as a tragedy, while a biographical approach might trace the relationship between Lucretia and Williams’s own schizophrenic sister Rose. For some considerations of various new theoretical approaches in literary criticism together with examples of their application to a dramatic text by Williams, you might consult Confronting Tennessee Williams’s “A Streetcar Named Desire”: Essays in Cultural Pluralism, edited by Philip C. Kolin (Westport: Greenwood, 1993).

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Central thematic issues include the question of illusion and reality, the relationship between madness and art, and the role of the artist in society, as well as the necessity to respond compassionately and nonjudgmentally to the needs of God’s sensitive yet weak creatures who are battered and misunderstood. Historically, Williams’s relation to the myth of the cavalier South should be explored. Finally, Williams’s close identification with his heroines needs to be seen in light of his relationship with his schizophrenic sister Rose, as he admits in his Memoirs, the most intensely emotional
Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Although “Portrait” itself is essentially a realistic, albeit somewhat poetic, play, Williams himself should be approached as an innovator of a new “plastic” theater, a practitioner, along with Arthur Miller, of what some have termed “a theatre of gauze.” To handle this aspect of Williams’s aesthetic, the instructor might either read or reproduce as a handout the dramatist’s Production Notes to Glass Menagerie, along with Tom’s opening narration in that play, which really differentiates Williams’s practice—“truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion”—from the strict realism—“illusion that has the appearance of truth”—of others.

Original Audience

The choice of the one-act play form itself tells something about Williams’s intended audience. Rather than aim at a commercial production, “Portrait” seems more appropriate for an amateur (academic or civic) theater presentation, where the interest will be largely on character and dialogue rather than production values. Thus, it appears intended for a limited audience of intense theatergoers. From the perspective of the dramatist, it serves partly as a “study” for larger work(s), in the same way a painter might do a series of studies before attempting a full canvas. And so, in a sense, the artist too is his own audience.
Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Lucretia Collins bears comparison with other Williams heroines in “The Lady of Larkspur Lotion,” The Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desire, and Summer and Smoke. Students might also contrast the way Miss Collins escapes from the sociocultural milieu that constricts her freedom with the heroines’ responses in Susan Glaspell’s short play “Trifles” and William Faulkner’s short story “A Rose for Emily.”

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. (a) Consider the dramatic function(s) of the minor characters, the Porter and the Elevator Boy, in the play.
   (b) Could “Portrait of a Madonna” have been expanded to a full-length work? To accomplish that, what else might Williams have dramatized? Would anything have been lost in the transformation?

2. (a) The director of the original production of “Portrait” had Lucretia exit clutching a doll. What, if anything, would justify such an interpolation in Williams’s text, and what might be the impact on the audience?
   (b) Discuss the theater metaphor in “Portrait”: the minor characters as onstage audience; the bedroom, scene of illusions, as stage; Mr. Abrams as stage manager/director, etc.
   (c) In what way does Williams’s characterization of Lucretia Collins lead the audience to conclude that he considered her story “tragic”?

Bibliography


Eudora Welty (b. 1909)

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Classroom Issues and Strategies

Like many lyric novelists, Welty is easy to read. She therefore seems (to many students) very simple. They like her work, generally, and don’t want to ruin their enjoyment by having to analyze it.

I like to begin by looking at what makes Welty seem simple (her lovely sentences, the homey metaphors, her “impulse to praise”). The difficulty here is not a lack of accessibility, but rather that Welty seems too accessible, too superficial. The challenge is to get students to read Welty seriously, critically, analytically.

Welty has said that except what’s personal there’s so little to tell. I’d start where she did: with the hearts of the characters she’s writing about—the universal emotions they share with us. Why do we feel a certain way about the story? The situation? The character? What is evoked? How is Welty able to evoke a certain response from us? What values emerge? A strong sense of values is something Welty shares with writers like William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, Katherine Anne Porter, Walker Percy, and Alice Walker. These novelists believe in certain things and the communities created in their fiction share both a value system and a sense of what words like “love” and “compassion” mean.

As with most of the southern writers, Welty’s humor, her use of the grotesque, and her dialogue are often initial difficulties for students, who tend to take her too literally and thus miss the fun she’s having. Welty’s books often work the way folk or fairy tales do; students aren’t used to this.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Major themes include the problem of balancing love and separateness (the community and one’s sense of self), the role and influence of family and the land (“place”), and the possibilities of art (storytelling) to inform life. Welty is also very concerned with resonances of classical mythology, legend, and folktale, and with the intersection of history and romance.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Welty clearly owes something to fellow Mississippian William Faulkner, and to the oral tradition of the South. She has a terrific ear, reproducing cadences of dialect and giving much insight into her characters by allowing her readers to hear them talk. Welty’s work also owes something to the grotesque as developed in the American South.
Original Audience

Since Welty hasn’t been grouped with writers critical of the South (her issues are neither political nor social in a broad sense), her work hasn’t been read much differently over the years. She’s been criticized for not attacking the South; that has never been her interest or her aim.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Any of the southerners writing in the twentieth century could be compared to Welty in terms of voice, violence, attitude toward the land, feelings about community, and ways of telling a story. William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, Katherine Anne Porter, Walker Percy—even Alice Walker—would be good to start with.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. I like to start with what students see. I think study questions (except for general questions relating to the elements of the story—point of view, character, theme) direct their reading toward what they think I want them to see rather than allowing them to see what they see.
2. I am fond of the short paper (2–3 pages) and of the directed journal. The former allows students to focus on a very specific problem or concern; the latter allows students to carry issues from one author to the next, or from one book to the next. I like assigning a formal paper from one of the journal entries.

Bibliography

Welty’s essay “Place in Fiction” is very good. Welty’s book of photographs, One Time, One Place, is a nice companion piece, as is her collection of essays, The Eye of the Story. Peggy Prenshaw’s Conversations with Eudora Welty has some helpful information, and I think her collection of essays (Eudora Welty: Critical Essays) and John F. Desmond’s (A Still Moment: Essays on the Art of Eudora Welty) are both worthwhile reading.

My chapter on Losing Battles (in A Tissue of Lies) is also worth reading.

Ann Petry (1908–1997)

Contributing Editor: Hilary Holladay

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Classroom Issues and Strategies

So much is going on in Petry’s novels and short stories that you may wonder where to begin a classroom discussion. For a discussion of “The Witness,” racial conflicts, power plays between men and women, and problems within the community of Wheeling are all equally valid starting points. Petry rarely dwells on one social problem, though students particularly sensitive to one or another issue (racism, for instance) may not recognize the range of her concerns on a first reading. Therefore, asking students to discuss the connections between matters of race and gender in “The Witness” may help them grasp this story. Once they see how entwined the social issues are in “The Witness,” they will be well on their way to understanding the scope of Petry’s vision.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Prejudice is a central concern in Petry’s writing. In almost all of her works, complex relationships develop among individuals prejudiced against each other for reasons of race or gender. But her fiction contains few characters who are solely victim or solely oppressors. Never one to make snap judgments, she imbues even her most objectionable characters with humanity. The would-be rapist Boots Smith in The Street, for example, has been a victim of racial prejudice. While Petry does not excuse his behavior, she does acknowledge the pathos of his life. Likewise, in “The Witness,” she provides the delinquent boys with a social context: They are intelligent young men, stifled by both church and school, who have no positive outlet for their myriad frustrations.

In addition to exploring the intersections of racism and sexism, Petry chronicles the ways in which people chase after the American dream only to find that it is illusory. Petry’s characters typically experience a profound disillusionment in their quests for success and/or peace of mind. This disillusionment drives them toward a drastic act that has significant implications for the whole community as well as the individual protagonist. This is true of “The Witness” as well as of Petry’s novels.

In their emphasis on troubled communities and individual journeys toward freedom, Petry’s works contain echoes of nineteenth-century slave narratives. The Street’s Lutie Johnson is a prime example of an oppressed character whose life devolves into a series of desperate escapes. The endings of Petry’s works, however, depart from those of prototypical slave narratives: neither Lutie Johnson nor Charles Woodruff achieves a meaningful victory merely by escaping an intolerable situation.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Although Petry’s writing is clear and simply stated (reflecting her...
journalistic background), her frequently discursive style finds its full power in novels and long stories. Since her fiction focuses on relationships and communities, she often uses multiple points of view, flashbacks, and other devices that enable her to portray whole towns as well as individuals. Throughout her career, she has skillfully employed realism and naturalism (in her novels), stream-of-consciousness (notably in *The Narrows*), and indirect discourse (in her novels and many of her stories).

Her experiments with varied techniques and voices (male and female, black and white) underscore Petry's fascination with multiple perspectives. In “Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?” and *Country Place*, she explores the complementary roles that narrators and listeners play in a story’s creation. “The Witness” contains a related theme: As readers, we “witness” Woodruff’s tale, just as he witnesses a crime. At the end of “The Witness,” we are in a position quite similar to Woodruff’s. Our personal perspective influences our understanding of his tale. Given our individual circumstances, will we repeat his tale? Or will we try to keep the story, and all of its difficulties, as a troubling secret?

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

Petry defies easy categorization, partly because she is contemporary with writers as far removed from each other in time and aesthetics as Richard Wright and Toni Morrison. But Petry can be productively compared and contrasted with authors representing several different strands of American literature.

As an African-American woman, she fits in a historical continuum including Harriet Wilson and Harriet Jacobs in the nineteenth century; Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, and Gwendolyn Brooks in the first half of the twentieth century; and Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Terry McMillan (among others) today. The beginning of her career in the mid-1940s also suggests a natural grouping with Wright as well as with Ralph Ellison and Chester Himes. As a writer preoccupied with communities and the social problems they harbor, Petry invites comparison with William Faulkner and Eudora Welty. And her fictional explorations of New England put her in the company of writers as diverse as Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Sarah Orne Jewett.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

1. Students reading “The Witness” will have several natural points of identification: their experience as teenagers, their contact with teachers/authority figures, and their perceptions of race relations and sexual politics. But because “The Witness” invites us to transcend individual perspectives, I use study questions that probe the story’s intriguing ambiguities: How does this story complicate conventional perceptions of protagonist versus adversary? Identify the characteristics that prevent Charles Woodruff and Dr. Shipley, the Congregational minister, from being wholly “good” characters. Are the boys who attack Nellie entirely “evil”? Explain your opinion.

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How are these boys different from the students Woodruff describes as the “Willing Workers of America”? How do the boys’ violent acts reflect on the town of Wheeling? How might Woodruff’s relationship with his wife (encapsulated in his memories) affect his decision to leave Wheeling? How might we as readers, and potential critics, identify with Woodruff’s plight at the end of the story?

2. Critical essays might address the following topics: the theme of “witnessing” in both its religious and secular senses; the double standard Woodruff endures as a black male authority figure; and the story’s connections between racism and sexism (a recurring theme in Petry’s work). For longer papers, students might compare “The Witness” to one of the other Wheeling stories in Miss Muriel and Other Stories, or compare Woodruff with The Street’s Lutie Johnson.

Bibliography

Carlos Bulosan (1913–1956)

Contribution Editors: Amy Ling, Oscar Campomanes, and King-Kok Cheung

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Some readers may be repulsed by what they consider an overly negative portrayal of American society. Their reactions range from incredulity to discomfort to rejection of what they consider to be exaggeration. Other readers are quick to dismiss Bulosan on aesthetic criteria, believing America Is in the Heart to be autobiographical and sociological rather than “literary.” The issue of genre is another problem area: His fiction seems autobiographical, his poetry prosy, his short stories read like essays and his essays like short stories.

Providing students with biographical background on Bulosan and giving them historical information on Philippine immigration will set this text into its proper context. This text is primarily a novel and at the same time, as Carey McWilliams has pointed out, “it reflects the collective life experience of thousands of Filipino immigrants who were attracted to this country by its legendary promises of a better life.”

If a slide show or video on Philippine immigration is obtainable, it would provide useful information. The film Manongs from Visual Communications in California is an excellent introduction. NAATA/Cross Current Media at 346 Ninth Street, San Francisco is an excellent source of Asian-American videos.

As students read Bulosan, they ask, “Who is this man? What group does he belong to? What are his concerns? Is the plight of the immigrant today different than it was in the 1930s and 1940s?”

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Bulosan’s major theme is exile and return—the effect of departure from home and the necessity to return to the Philippines in order to make sense of the exile’s experience in the United States because of the colonial status of the Philippines.

His second purpose is to record his own, his family’s, and his friends’ experiences and lives, their loneliness and alienation.
Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Bulosan wrote with an eye to violating literary conventions, as mentioned above. As a political activist and labor organizer, he also believed that creative literary activity and social purpose cannot be separated. Students should be made aware of the gulf between the ideals of America as the land of equality and opportunity and the painful, violent reality Bulosan delineates in this representative selection of *America Is in the Heart*.

Original Audience

Bulosan, at the beginning of his career, wrote for a mainstream American audience, and was placed in the position of cultural mediator, a bridge between the Philippines (which America wanted to know better during World War II) and the United States. Late in life, he consciously cultivated a Filipino audience, sending stories back to the Philippines, most of which were rejected. In the 1970s, he was “rediscovered” by Asian-Americans delighted to have found a spokesperson as prolific and multifaceted as he.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

In his unadorned, deceptively simple prose style, he resembles Ernest Hemingway; in his social concerns, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. Bulosan may be compared with Maxine Hong Kingston in that both were critically acclaimed by a wide audience but denounced by certain portions of their own community who accused them of having “sold out.” With Kingston he also shares a reliance on peasant forms of storytelling as well as the seeming incoherence of their works and the question of genre.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. The students may be directed to think about whether there are distinguishing characteristics to Filipino immigrant experience setting it apart from Chinese, Japanese, Korean, or any European group.
2. Ask students to keep a journal of their random reactions to the text. On a sheet of paper, have them record quotes, phrases, or words from the text that were particularly significant to them; on the right-hand side of the sheet, they are to record their reactions. Later they write a one page statement of their responses, setting up a dialogue between themselves and their instructor. The instructor then makes a response and ditoes up the dialogue so that the entire class can enter into the dialogue. Finally the class writes papers on the entire classroom-wide dialogue.

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Bibliography


Mario Suarez (1925–1998)

Teaching material for Mario Suarez is available on The Heath Anthology web site. (To access the site, please go to the Houghton Mifflin college home page at http://college.hmco.com. Select English, then select The Heath Anthology textbook site.)

Frank Chinn (b. 1940)

Teaching material for Frank Chinn is available on The Heath Anthology web site. (To access the site, please go to the Houghton Mifflin college home page at http://college.hmco.com. Select English, then select The Heath Anthology textbook site.)

Flannery O’Connor (1925–1964)

Contributing Editor: Beverly Lyon Clark

Classroom Issues and Strategies

My students have trouble dealing with the horror that O’Connor evokes—often they want to dismiss the story out of hand, while I want to use it to raise questions. Another problem pertains to religious belief: Either students lack any such belief (which might make a kind of sense of O’Connor’s violence) or else, possessing it, they latch onto O’Connor’s religious explanations at the expense of any other approach.

I like to start with students’ gut responses—to start with where they already are and to make sure I address the affective as well as the cognitive. In particular, I break the class into groups of five and ask students to try to build consensus in answering study questions.

In general, the elusiveness of O’Connor’s best stories makes them eminently teachable—pushing students to sustain ambiguity, to withhold final judgments. It also pushes me to teach better—to empower students more effectively, since I don’t have all the answers at my fingertips. My responses to O’Connor are always tentative, exploratory. I start, as do most of my students, with a gut response that is negative. For O’Connor defies my humanistic values—she distances the characters and thwarts compassion. Above all, O’Connor’s work raises tantalizing questions. Is she, as John

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1 With thanks to LynAnn Mastaj and her classmates for comments on these questions.

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Hawkes suggests, “happily on the side of the devil”? Or, on the contrary, does the diabolical Misfit function, paradoxically, as an agent of grace? We know what O’Connor wants us to believe. But should we?

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

One important context that I need to provide for my students is background on O’Connor’s Christianity. The most useful source here is O’Connor’s own essays and lectures, which often explain how to read her works as she would have them read. Certainly O’Connor’s pronouncements have guided much of the criticism of her work. I’ll summarize some of her main points.

She states that the subject of her work is “the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil” (Mystery and Manners 118). She tries to portray in each story “an action that is totally unexpected, yet totally believable” (118), often an act of violence, violence being “the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially” (113). Through violence she wants to evoke Christian mystery, though she doesn’t exclude other approaches to her fiction: she states that she could not have written “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” in any other way but “there are perhaps other ways than my own in which this story could be read” (109).

In general O’Connor explains that she is not so much a realist of the social fabric as a “realist of distances” (44), portraying both concrete everyday manners and something more, something beyond the ordinary: “It is the business of fiction to embody mystery through manners” (124). She admits too that her fiction might be called grotesque, though she cautions that “anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic” (40). And she connects her religious concerns with being southern, for, she says, “while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted” (44).

I also find it important to address the question of racism in the story. Is the story racist? I ask. Is the grandmother racist, in her comments on cute little pickaninnies and her use of “nigger”? Does the narrator endorse the grandmother’s attitude? And what do we make of her naming a cat Pitty Sing—a pseudo-Japanese name that sounds less like Japanese than like a babtalk version of “pretty thing”? Is O’Connor simply presenting characteristically racist attitudes of not particularly admirable characters? I find Alice Walker’s comments helpful here, on O’Connor’s respectful reluctance to enter the minds of black characters and pretend to know what they’re thinking.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

O’Connor is usually compared to writers who are southern or gothic or Catholic or some combination thereof: for example, William Faulkner, Nathanael West, Graham Greene. Louise Westling (in Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and

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Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

The following questions can be given to students in advance or used to guide discussion during class:

1. What qualities of the grandmother do you like? What qualities do you dislike? How did you feel when The Misfit killed her? Why?
2. How would you characterize the other members of the family? What is the function of images like the following: the mother’s “face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage and was tied around with a green head-kerchief that had two points on the top like a rabbit’s ears” and the grandmother’s “big black valise looked like the head of a hippopotamus”?
3. How does O’Connor foreshadow the encounter with The Misfit?
4. What does the grandmother mean by a “good man”? Whom does she consider good people? What are other possible meanings of “good”? Why does she tell The Misfit that he’s a good man? Is there any sense in which he is?
5. What is the significance of the discussion of Jesus? Was he a good man?
6. What is the significance of the grandmother’s saying, “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children”?
7. What is the significance of The Misfit’s saying, “She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life”?

There are, of course, no absolute answers to these questions; the story resists easy solutions, violates the reader’s expectations.
Bibliography

Other O'Connor stories well worth reading and teaching include “The Displaced Person,” “The Artificial Nigger,” “Good Country People,” “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” “Revelation,” and “Parker’s Back” (all in The Complete Stories [Farrar, 1971]). O’Connor’s essays have been collected in Mystery and Manners (Farrar, 1969). The fullest collection of works by O’Connor is the Collected Works (Library of America, 1988).

As for secondary sources, the fullest biography so far, at least until O’Connor’s long-time friend Sally Fitzgerald completes hers, is Lorine M. Getz’s Flannery O’Connor: Her Life, Library and Book Reviews (Mellen, 1980).

For discussion of O’Connor’s social, religious, and intellectual milieus, see Robert Coles’s Flannery O’Connor’s South (Louisiana State University Press, 1980). A fine companion piece is Barbara McKenzie’s photographic essay, Flannery O’Connor’s Georgia (University of Georgia Press, 1980).

Four collections of essays provide a good range of criticism on O’Connor:


Overall, criticism of O’Connor has appeared in more than forty book-length studies and hundreds of articles (including those published annually in the Flannery O’Connor Bulletin). Most criticism continues to be either religious or formalist. But for a discussion that situates O’Connor’s work historically, in the postwar era, addressing its intersections with liberal discourse, see Thomas Hill Schaub’s chapter on O’Connor in American Fiction in the Cold War (Wisconsin, 1991).

Joyce Carol Oates (b. 1938)

Contributing Editor: Eileen T. Bender
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Classroom Issues and Strategies

In a time of instant fare—both literal and intellectual—Joyce Carol Oates is most demanding. A master of short fiction, she has also published a large number of novels and novellas, both under her own name and under a pseudonym, “Rosamond Smith.” Indeed, Oates has produced an amazing variety of work in virtually all literary genres: novels, short stories, drama, critical essays, screenplays, opera libretti, poetry, reviews of contemporary writing and ideas. She reads, edits, and teaches, currently holding a chair professorship at Princeton University. She defeats those readers who want artists to fit certain categories. Extremely well read and at home in the classroom, Oates is often deliberately allusive.

While she calls her writing “experimental,” Oates’s works are highly accessible—at least at first glance. Often, as in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” they begin in familiar territory. The central characters and the scenes are vivid and recognizable. Details (in this case, the drive-in teen culture, the sibling rivalry, the snatches of popular songs) enhance the sense of déjà vu. Yet by the end, dark and violent forces surface to baffle conventional expectations of both character and plot. Once again, the so-called “Dark Lady of American Letters” creates a disturbance, challenging the reader to think of both fiction and reality with new and deeper understanding.

Because of the variety of her work, Oates can be viewed as a “woman of letters.” Students will be interested in a writer who is constantly engaged in public discussion (in print most frequently) of the arts: they should watch for her letters to the editor, interviews, essays, and reviews in the New York Times, and frequent articles in the popular press.

Oates’s work itself can be approached at different levels of sophistication. It is always interesting to explore the many allusive patterns in her fiction. Several of her short stories are meant as explicit imitations of famous forebears (e.g., “The Dead,” “Metamorphosis,” “The Lady With the Pet Dog”), and those can be read in tandem to see the complexity of Oates’s relationship to literary tradition.

In “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” Oates makes an ordinary tale extraordinary by juxtaposing two powerful legends: the modern rock hero (the story is dedicated to activist-song writer Bob Dylan), and the ancient demon lover. Drawing together these threads, Oates is able to tell a chilling tale of a young adolescent, tantalized by glamorous surf aces, unable to resist more satanic designs. In this case, the “accessible” story needs to be peeled back, in order for Oates’s intentions and the full sense of the work to be understood.

In responding to this story, students are disturbed by the violence that erupts from ordinary reality, and question its function or purpose—especially if they view literature as a kind of moral lesson or as an escape into a world elsewhere (the romantic paradigm). They will ask questions about the author herself, surprised that so academic and soft-spoken a person is capable of describing such violence in her stories. These responses provide an ideal occasion to discuss the creative process, and the difference between author and character, biography and literature, reality imagined and imaginative reality.
Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

At the center of much of Oates's work is concern about the singular power of the self, and the high cost of the struggle for autonomy. In this, she is like those contemporary “third force” psychologists she has studied and admired (chiefly Maslow) who posit a different human ideal: communion rather than mastery. Readers might focus on the patterns of selfhood and the possibilities for relationship in her work.

Oates also calls herself a “feminist” although she does not like the restrictive title of “woman writer”; rather, she prefers being described as a woman who writes. In her exploration of character and relationships, the nature of love and sexual power are frequently at issue. Again, this would be a fruitful topic for further reading and discussion, using Oates's own essays on androgyny, feminism, and the special circumstances of the “woman who writes” as starting point.

Oates is not only an avid student of literature and reader of history, psychology, and philosophy; she is a keen interpreter of the contemporary scene, concerned in her work with issues relevant to most modern readers. Besides feminist questions, her work has dealt with politics, migrant workers, racial conflict, academic life, girl gangs, medical and legal ethics, urban riots, and, perhaps most surprisingly, boxing. Such work is immediately accessible to students. It also allows Oates to expose her own sense of the wonder and mystery of human character and personality.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Since her first novel was published in 1964, Oates has tested almost every major literary school or set of conventions: naturalism, existentialism, social realism, detective stories, epic chronicle, romance. Presenting excerpts from Oates’s novels would not only show her versatility, but would convey the way literature has an important and imposing influence on the modern writer.

While the story in this anthology unfolds chronologically and appears conventional, the more surrealistic subtext imposes itself and frustrates the fairy-tale or “happy ending” quest. The subversion of one convention by another here is not only interesting in its own right, but enforces Oates’s thematic design.

Original Audience

“Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” is of course a contemporary story; yet it also rests on a diminishing sense of recent history. It was written for an audience who had themselves lived through the tumultuous American 1960s, with its antiwar activism, folk and rock music,
and emergent “youth culture.” If indeed the hippies of that time are the middle-aged establishment of today, it would be important for students to reacquaint themselves with the work of Bob Dylan (the story’s dedicatee) and others represented, as well as the perilous uncertainty of those times, which would have heightened the risks of adolescent passage.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

While Oates has been variously compared and contrasted with Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, and even Theodore Dreiser, one of the more interesting writers with whom she might be compared is Flannery O’Connor. (Oates even wrote a moving poem about her, following O’Connor’s death.) “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” can best be compared with O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” in which gratuitous and even mindless violence bursts through and destroys the pious confidence of O’Connor’s ordinary country people. Both Oates and O’Connor emphasize the reality and presence of evil. But in O’Connor’s case, the imminence of evil transforms visible reality into mere illusion. For Oates, naivete (not innocence) is dangerous in a perennially fallen but vividly real world.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

Questions useful before reading the selection would concern the two “legends” that are important to the story: Dylan and Demon.

1. Why is this story dedicated to Bob Dylan?
2. Who is Arnold Friend? Do you think he is appropriately named? What is the significance of his car? His clothing? His language?
3. When and why does Connie begin to question his identity? What impact does her confusion have on her own personality? How are “personality” and “identity” displayed and defined in this story?
4. Note the complex interactions among the female characters in the story: girlfriends, siblings, and the mother-daughter relationship. In what sense is the story about a woman’s “coming of age”?

Additionally, students may need more background on Dylan and the ’60s to understand Oates’s view of the demonic aspect of those times in America.

In dealing with this story, students might be asked to put themselves in the place of Connie’s sister or one of Connie’s “real” friends, describing Friend or their perception of what has happened. The title should be discussed. Students can be asked to find the Dylan lyric that gives the story its title, play it for the class, and lead a discussion of the culture and politics.
of the 1960s; photographs of that time could be especially useful in picturing the look and style Friend tries to emulate. Students might write about the danger of "codes": their power to distort perception.

Another approach could be aesthetic: specifically, viewing the story not as realistic but surrealistic. Here, paintings of modern masters such as Magritte or Dali could illustrate the hauntingly familiar contours of the surrealistic imagination—another possible written assignment. Oates herself refers to an earlier surrealist, Bosch, in the title of an early novel, A Garden of Earthly Delights. That painting might generate a lively discussion of Oates’s vision of evil.

Finally, Joyce Chopra’s excellent 1985 film adaptation of the story, Smooth Talk, can spark an interesting discussion of how Oates’s narrative is transformed cinematically.

Bibliography


John Updike (b. 1932)

Contributing Editor: George J. Searles

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Classroom Issues and Strategies

It is sometimes said that Updike is too narrowly an interpreter of the WASP/yuppie environment, a realm of somewhat limited interest; another is that his work proceeds from a too exclusively male perspective. The former concern will, of course, be more/less problematic depending on the nature of the college (more problematic at an urban community college, less so at a “prestige” school). The latter charge, however, provides the basis for fruitful discussion in any academic environment.

First, it’s important to point out what Henry James once said, to the effect that we must grant an author’s donnée and evaluate only in terms of what is made of it. But in Updike’s case, it’s also necessary to stress that his real concerns transcend his surface preoccupations. Although he’s often described as a chronicler of social ills, really he’s after larger game—the sheer intractability of the human predicament. Students must be shown that in Updike the particular is simply an avenue to the universal.

In addition to Updike’s stories, students should be referred to the magazine articles listed in the bibliography and to the 1979 short story collection Too Far to Go, which reprints all the previous “Maples” stories, along with several then-new ones, including “Separating.” Also useful is the videotaped television special based on that collection. Another instructive exercise is to compare this story with some of Updike’s early poems, particularly “Home Movies”—a little gem in its own right. Indeed, there’s a direct echo of this poem near the story’s conclusion: “We cannot climb back . . ./To that calm light. The brief film ends” is rendered in “Separating” as “You cannot climb back . . . you can only fall.”

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

During the course of his long and prolific career, Updike has produced a series of interlocking short stories about Richard and Joan Maple, an upwardly mobile but unhappy couple whose ill-fated union closely parallels Updike’s own first marriage to his college sweetheart, Mary Pennington. As critic Suzanne Henning Uphaus has neatly summarized it:

“The stories, written over a span of twenty-three years, follow the outward events. . . . Dick Maple, like Updike, married in the early fifties when he was twenty-one; both couples had four children, separated after twenty-one years, and finally received one of the first no-fault divorces granted in the state of Massachusetts.”

This is probably the place from which to launch a classroom treatment of a story like “Separating.”

Consider the protagonist’s bleak assertion in Updike’s Roger’s Version: “There are so few things which, contemplated, do not like flimsy trapdoors open under the weight of our attention into the bottomless pit below” (74). Surely this has much to do with Dickie’s baleful question “Why?” at the end of “Separating,” and his father’s perception of the boy’s query as “a window thrown open on emptiness.”
Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Updike is acknowledged as a master stylist. “Separating” provides ample evidence of his skill in this area. Note, for example, the story’s subtle but relentless accumulation of negative imagery. Again and again, key details reinforce Maple’s inner sense of inadequacy, failure, and dread. Simultaneously, however, these images are juxtaposed with details of an ironically playful nature, thereby establishing a balance of sorts between angst and whimsy, a tone of amused negation that’s perfectly suited to Updike’s view of the human condition.

Original Audience

As this is a contemporary story, the “when/now” issue is not relevant. As for audience, I think that Updike sees himself writing for people more or less like himself: WASP, affluent, etc. But again, it’s important when teaching Updike’s work to show that the problems his characters confront are in a broad sense everyone’s problems: responsibility, guilt, mortality, etc.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Updike is an exceptionally autobiographical writer. Perhaps that’s the place to begin with a story like “Separating.” Although this approach violates several critical tenets, it will get things rolling, and will lead ideally to discussion of the relationship between fiction and autobiography . . . how writers transmute personal experience into art. Comparisons can be drawn in this regard between Updike and Philip Roth and John Irving. Useful, too, is a consideration of the several New Yorker short stories by Updike’s son David, collected in Out On the Marsh (New American Library, 1988): “Separating” from another angle.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

In a lower-level course (e.g., Freshman Comp, Intro to Lit) Updike’s work—and especially a story like “Separating”—can generate good “personal experience” papers, as so many students today have first- or secondhand knowledge of separation and divorce. Obviously, the story also lends itself exceptionally well to treatments of the whole “responsibility to self versus responsibility to other” idea.
Bibliography


Ralph Waldo Ellison (1914–1994)

*Contributing Editor: John Alberti*

Classroom Issues and Strategies

“Brave Words for a Startling Occasion,” Ellison’s acceptance speech on being presented the National Book Award in 1953 for *Invisible Man*, can provide some starting points for class discussion of the two short stories included in *The Heath Anthology*. In the speech, Ellison defines what he sees as the moral responsibilities of the American writer, both in terms of theme and style. Recalling “our classical nineteenth-century novelists” (presumably writers like Melville, Hawthorne, and Stowe), Ellison calls on contemporary writers to return to the “much greater responsibility for the condition of democracy” demonstrated in their novels, which he describes as “imaginative projections of the conflicts within the human heart when the sacred principles of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights clashed with the practical exigencies of human greed and fear, hate and love.” As an African-American writer, Ellison says he is especially drawn to the way that in these novels “the Negro was the gauge of the human condition as it waxed and waned in our democracy.” “Our task,” Ellison concludes, “is always to challenge the apparent forms of reality” and to do so with a prose that is as “flexible, and swift as American change is swift.” Operating as both goal and article of faith for Ellison is the idea that, ultimately, “American experience” (and by extension the American people) “is of a whole.”

One way into Ellison’s stories, then, is to consider how well they exemplify these ideals, both in their graphic, unsparing depictions of the brutality of racism and their invocation of flight as an image of freedom and possibility. In keeping with Ellison’s insistence on expressing the multiplicity of experience, he tells these stories of racial oppression through two very different narrators: a young white boy facing initiation into a
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legacy of hatred and violence and a young black aviator struggling against internalizing social assumptions of black inferiority. Some overarching questions to consider might be whether and to what extent these different perspectives finally tell one story and what possibilities these stories hold out for challenging and transforming the realities they describe. What are the prospects for communication, empathy, and reconciliation between the narrators of these two stories?

In approaching these stories as rhetorical performances, it is important to consider the question of audience, both the original reading public Ellison may have had in mind when writing these stories (and in this light the fact that “A Party down at the Square” remained unpublished in Ellison’s lifetime could be significant) and the demographic context of the classroom where the stories are being discussed: how students in the class identify themselves or find themselves identified racially, geographically, and historically will condition their identification with and interpretation of these two narrators, not necessarily in easily or stereotypically predictable ways, but in significant ways that can be foregrounded as part of class discussion. This is especially true for “A Party Down at the Square,” where readers are asked to measure their reactions to the horrific events described against their understanding of and sympathy with the young white narrator of the story. The story shares with “Flying Home” the use of the airplane as a complex symbol of modernity, freedom, power, and affluence; in this case, however, the symbol becomes literally entangled in power lines, perhaps suggesting a similar contrast between the ideas of modernity and progress and the legacy of racial oppression embodied in the lynching and the statue of the Confederate Army general overseeing the spectacle. The narrator, significantly a child on the verge of adolescence, acts as a symbolic locus for this conflict, and the moral drama of the story centers on his reactions to the lynching and the ways we as readers think his outlook and actions will be affected. Of particular interest in this story is the way Ellison focuses on the ways white Americans destroy themselves spiritually and even physically through the maintenance of racism (both a white woman and a black man are burned alive during the story, achieving a grisly communion in the blackness of their ashes and the whiteness of bone) as the boy confronts the idea that his “racial” inheritance consists not only of social status and power but also unthinking hatred and violence.

“Flying Home” evokes both the Icarus myth from Greek mythology, with its focus on the heroism and tragedy of ambition, and the “flying African” story from African-American culture, with its invocation of freedom and escape. For Todd in the story, flight represents a way to soar above the limitations imposed by racism on the Earth below, but in his hopes that success as a military aviator will finally “prove” the legitimacy of his and other African Americans’ claims to full and equal status in American society, the story suggests he carries those limitations with him as he flies. The story also points to a very specific historical context, as the experience of African-American soldiers in the Second World War, a war fought against a racist German government, in many ways brought to a head frustrations over segregation and racism in the United States and was a key contributing factor to the rise of the modern civil rights movement in the 1950s. One question for class discussion, then, can center on the strategies and difficulties of “proving” one’s humanity according to the criteria of a racist society built on the systematic denial of any such claims.

Todd’s own ambivalence about his chances for success are embodied
in the tension between himself and Jefferson, the poor sharecropper who helps him after the plane crashes. Todd wants to distance himself from a man he sees as a symbol of rural ignorance and passive acceptance of racist oppression, yet he experiences feelings of guilt about these feelings and about how his accident will be interpreted both by white authority figures and other African Americans. At the center of this conflict, Jefferson tells Todd his folktale about his time in heaven, itself another use of the flying African myth. The result is a story within a story, and students can consider how Jefferson’s story relates to Todd’s, particularly in relation to Todd’s fear and anger that Jefferson may be making fun of him. These questions of insecurity again raise the issue of the psychological damage done by racism that we encounter in “A Party down at the Square,” and they can also bring us back to the ironic title of Ellison’s National Book Award acceptance essay. How does the self-mocking tone of “Brave Words for a Startling Occasion” lead us to think about Ellison’s own rhetorical position in accepting the award? While seizing the opportunity to make some very specific demands of American writers, there is also a note of suspicion in regards to what the motives of the (largely white) critics who present him this award might be. In the end, we are left thinking about in what ways Todd’s ambitions and fears might relate to Ellison’s own (successful) attempt to claim a position in American literary history.

Bibliography


James Baldwin (1924–1987)

*Contributing Editors: Trudier Harris and John Reilly*

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Problems surround Baldwin’s voicing the subjectivity of characters, the great sympathy he awards to the outlook of the marginalized. Students normally meet the underclass as victims perhaps objectified by statistics and case studies. For that matter, students who are not African American have difficulty with the black orientation arising from Baldwin’s middle-class characters: the artists and other, more conventionally successful people.

The strategies flow from the principle that people do not experience their lives as victims, even if Baldwin’s popular social autobiographical essay *Notes of a Native Son*—the portion where he recounts contracting the
“dread, chronic disease” of anger and fury when denied service in a diner—might be useful in raising the issue of why Baldwin says every African-American has a Bigger Thomas in his head. The anger may become creative, as might the pain. A companion discussion explores the importance of blues aesthetic to Baldwin: the artful treatment of common experience by a singular singer whose call evokes a responsive confirmation from those who listen to it. In addition, an exploration of the aesthetic of popular black music would also enhance the students’ understanding.

Within a literary context, the strategies should establish that fictional narrative is the only way we know the interior experience of other people. The imagination creating the narrative presents an elusive subjectivity. If a writer is self-defined as African American, that writer will aim to inscribe the collective subjectivity under the aspect of a particular character. Of course, the point is valid for women writers and other groups also, as long as the writers have chosen deliberately to identify themselves as part of the collective body.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

Themes of personal importance include the significance of community identification, the communion achieved in “Sonny’s Blues,” for example; the conflicted feelings following success when that requires departure from the home community; the power of love to bridge difference. The chief historical issue centers on the experience of urbanization following migration from an agricultural society. The philosophical issue concerns Baldwin’s use of religious imagery and outlook, his interest in redemption and the freeing of spirit. Interestingly, this philosophical/religious issue is often conveyed in the secular terms of blues, but transcendence remains the point.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Baldwin’s frequent use of the first-person narration and the personal essay naturally associates his writing with autobiography. His fiction should be discussed in relation to the traditions of African-American autobiography which, since the fugitive slave narratives, has presented a theme of liberation from external bondage and a freeing of subjectivity to express itself in writing. As for period, his writing should be looked at as a successor to polemical protest; thus, it is temporally founded in the 1950s and 1960s.

**Original Audience**

In class I ask students to search out signs that the narrative was written for.
one audience or the other: What knowledge is expected of the reader? What past experiences are shared by assumption? Incidentally, this makes an interesting way to overcome the resistance to the material. Without being much aware that they are experiencing African-American culture, most Americans like the style and sound of blues and jazz, share some of the ways of dress associated with those arts and their audiences, and know the speech patterns.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

One can make a comparison with Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* and Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. The basis is the degree of identification with African-Americans accomplished in each. How closely does the writer approach the consciousness of the black slave and street kids? Measure and discuss the gap between the shock felt by Delano and the communion of the brothers in Baldwin’s story.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

Keeping in mind that James Baldwin’s first experiences with “the word” occurred in evangelical churches, see if that influences his use of the “literary word.”

What does Baldwin’s short story tell you about the so-called ghetto that you could not learn as well from an article in a sociology journal?

College students are responsive to questions of the ethics of success. They may raise it with this story of “Sonny’s Blues” by wondering why the narrator should feel guilty and even by speculating about what will happen to the characters next.

**Bibliography**


**Paule Marshall (b. 1929)**

*Contributing Editor: Dorothy L. Denniston*

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Classroom Issues and Strategies

One strategy for approaching Marshall’s fiction is to explain the “Middle Passage” to illustrate the placement of blacks all over the world (African diaspora). It might also be helpful to discuss the notion of traditional African cyclical time, which involves recurrence and duration, as opposed to Western linear time, which suggests change and progress. The cyclic approach applies thematically (Da-duh’s symbolic immortality) and structurally (the story comes full circle). Also important is the traditional African view of the world as being composed of dualities/opposites that work together to constitute a harmonious moral order. (For a more complete explanation, see Marshall’s “From the Poets in the Kitchen” in Reena and Other Short Stories.)

Consider also discussing the African oral tradition as a recorder of history and preserver of folk tradition. Since it is centered on the same ideas as written literatures (the ideas, beliefs, hopes, and fears of a people), its purpose is to create and maintain a group identity, to guide social action, to encourage social interaction, and simply to entertain. The oral arts are equally concerned with preserving the past to honor traditional values and to reveal their relevance to the modern world. Marshall’s craftsmanship is executed in such a dynamic fashion as to elicit responses usually reserved for oral performance or theater.

Students readily respond to similarities/differences between black cultures represented throughout the diaspora. Once they recognize African cultural components as positive, they reevaluate old attitudes and beliefs and begin to appreciate differences in cultural perspectives as they celebrate the human spirit.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

A major theme is the search for identity (personal and cultural). Marshall insists upon the necessity for a “journey back” through history in order to come to terms with one’s past as an explanation of the present and as a guiding post for the future. For the author, in particular, the story becomes a means to begin unraveling her multicultural background (American, African American, African Caribbean). To be considered foremost is the theme embodied in the epigram: the quality of life itself is threatened by giving priority to materialistic values over those that nourish the human spirit.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Questions for form and style include Marshall’s manipulation of time and her juxtaposition of images to create opposites (landscape, physical description, culture). This suggests an artistic convention that is, at base, African as it imitates or revives in another form the African oral narrative.
708  • The Heath Anthology of American Literature

tradition. In fact, Marshall merges Western literary tradition with that of the
African to create a new, distinctive expression.

Original Audience

All audiences find Marshall accessible. It might be interesting to contrast her
idyllic view of Barbados in “To Da-duh” with her later view in the story
“Barbados.” The audience may wish to share contemporary views of third
world countries and attitudes toward Western powers.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Both Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall deal with ancestral figures
(connections to the past) to underscore cyclical patterns or deviations from
them. Morrison’s Song of Solomon (1977), Tar Baby (1981), or Beloved
(1988) might be effectively compared to Marshall’s Praisesong for the
Widow (1983), Brown Girl, Brownstones (1959), The Chosen Place, The

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

Discuss the use of African and Caribbean imagery and explain why it is
essential to Marshall’s aesthetic.

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Review especially the following:


John Okada (1923–1971)

Contributing Editor: King Kok Cheung

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students need historical background concerning World War II and the internment of Japanese Americans. Explain how people often internalize the attitudes of the dominant society even though the attitudes may seem unreasonable today. The documentary Rabbits in the Moon (1999), directed by Emiko Omori, provides an excellent background for the Japanese-American internment.
Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Historical context is crucial to the understanding of *No-No Boy*, since the novel explores unflinchingly the issues of Japanese-American identity. Is it half Japanese and half American, or is it neither? After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans in various coastal states—Washington, Oregon, California—were interned on account of their ethnicity alone. Camp authorities then administered a loyalty questionnaire that contained two disconcerting questions: “Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States in combat duty wherever ordered?” and “Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attacks of foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese Emperor, to any other foreign government, power, or organization?”

These questions divided the Japanese-American community and aggravated generational conflict. In some cases the parents still felt attached to their country of origin, while their American-born children—*nisei*—strived for an American identity. In other cases, the parents wanted to be loyal to America, but their children were too bitter against the American government to answer yes and yes.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Okada commands a style that is at once effusive and spontaneous, quiet and deep. He has a keen eye for subtle details and psychological nuances that enables him to capture the reserved yet affectionate interaction of Kenji’s family.

Yet Okada seldom lingers on one key. He can change his note rapidly from subdued pathos to withering irony, as when he moves from depicting the silent grief in Kenji’s household to exposing racism at the Club Oriental where Kenji feels totally comfortable because his being Japanese there does not call attention to itself. At that very moment, there is a commotion at the entrance: the Chinese owner reports that he has to prevent two “niggers” from entering the club with a Japanese. The one place where Kenji does not feel the sting of racial prejudice turns out to be just as racist as others.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Compare *No-No Boy* with Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* and Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James Houston’s *Farewell to Manzanar*. All three describe the adverse impact of the internment of Japanese-American families. The novel can also be compared with Chester Himes’s *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and Leslie Silko’s *Ceremony*; all three evoke the racial attitudes in the United States during and after World War II.
Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. (a) Why does Ichiro feel alienated?  
   (b) Why is Ichiro rejected by the people in his own ethnic community? Who are the exceptions?  
   (c) How would you characterize the interaction in Kenji’s family?  

2. (a) Compare the dilemmas of Ichiro and Kenji.  
   (b) Who is responsible for Ichiro’s suffering? Ichiro himself? His family? The Japanese-American community? America at large?  
   (c) Who is responsible for Kenji’s suffering?

Bibliography

Book-length literary works that dwell on the Japanese internment include the following:


For a detailed study of the relation between historical circumstances and literature, see the following:


A brief survey of Japanese-American literature can be found in:

Tillie Lerner Olsen (b. 1912)

Contribution Editor: Deborah S. Rosenfelt

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Olsen’s work is relatively easy to teach since it addresses themes of concern to contemporary students and since its experiments with language remain within the bounds of realism. *Tell Me a Riddle* is among the most difficult of Olsen’s works and some students have trouble for two reasons: They are unfamiliar with the social and political history embedded in the novella and they are confused by the allusive, stream-of-consciousness techniques Olsen employs for the revelation of that history’s centrality in the consciousness of the protagonist.

Since the knee-jerk negative reaction to “communists” is often a problem, I make sure I discuss thoroughly the historical soil out of which *Tell Me a Riddle* grows. Sometimes I show the film *Seeing Reds.* I always read students a useful passage from *A Long View from the Left: Memoirs of an American Revolutionary* (Delta, 1972, p. 8) by Al Richmond.

Showing the film version of *Tell Me a Riddle* can be a good strategy for provoking discussion. The film itself is one of the rare representations of older people’s lives and one of the few in which an older woman figures as the protagonist. Reading passages from Olsen’s *Silences,* especially the autobiographical ones, also proves helpful and interesting to students.

Students respond most immediately and deeply to Eva’s rage and anger about the sacrifices her life has involved. They also get into painful discussions about aging and dying, and about the limited options for the elderly in American society. The questions they ask include the following:

Why won’t the grandmother (Eva) hold her grandchild? Please help us figure out the configuration of family relationships in the story (here it helps if students have also read the other stories in the *Tell Me a Riddle* volume).
Why doesn’t Eva want to see the rabbi in the hospital? Where do they go when they go to the city on the beach (the answer to that one is Venice, California, an area near Los Angeles that houses an old Jewish community lovingly documented in the book and film, *Number Our Days*). Why won’t David let her go home again?

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

*Tell Me a Riddle* is very rich thematically, historically, and personally. Its central themes include the confrontation with aging, illness, and death; the deprivations and struggles of poverty; the conflicts, full of love and rage, in marital relations; the family, especially motherhood, as a site of both love and nurturance and of repression; the buying of women’s sense of self and the silencing of their capacities for expression over years of tending to the needs and listening to the rhythms of others; the quest for meaning in one’s personal life; and the affirmation of hope for and engagement on behalf of a freer, more peaceful, more just and humane world.

The themes of *Tell Me a Riddle* are in many ways the themes of Olsen’s life. Olsen’s parents took part in the 1905 revolution and became Socialist party activists in the United States. Olsen herself became a communist in the years when communism as a philosophy and as a movement seemed to offer the best hope for an egalitarian society. Eva is modeled partly on Olsen’s mother, who died of cancer, as does Eva.

I see Olsen as belonging to a tradition of women writers in this country associated with the American left, who unite a class consciousness and a feminist consciousness in their lives and creative work.
Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

In *Tell Me a Riddle*, Olsen is deliberately experimental, fracturing chronological sequence, using stream-of-consciousness techniques to represent the processes of human consciousness, insisting on the evocative power of each individual word. Though remaining within the bounds of realism, she draws fully on the techniques of modernist fiction to render a humanistic and socially impassioned vision rare in modernist and postmodernist writing.

Original Audience

The question of audience is, I think, less relevant to contemporary writers than to those of earlier centuries. I do speak about Olsen’s political background and about her special importance for contemporary women writers and readers. It is also important that the stories of the *Tell Me a Riddle* volume were written during the McCarthy era. All of them, especially *Tell Me a Riddle*, subtly bear witness to the disappointment and despair of progressives during that era, when the radical dreams and visions of the thirties and forties were deliberately eradicated. Olsen’s family was one of many to endure harassment by the FBI. *Riddle’s* topical allusions to Nazi concentration camps and the dropping of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima, and David’s yearning for a time of belief and belonging, contribute to the subtext of anguish and betrayal so characteristic of the literature of the period.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

I find it useful to compare *Tell Me a Riddle* to other works by women authors that record the tensions of “dual life,” especially those which, like *Riddle*, deploy an imagery of speech and silencing not only to delineate the protagonist’s quest for personal expression but also to develop her relationship to processes of social change. Among the many works that contain some configuration of these themes and images are Agnes Smedley’s novel *Daughter of Earth*, Harriet Arnow’s *The Dollmaker*, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, much of the poetry of Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, and Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*.

As stories of “secular humanist” Jewish family life, the work might be compared with Grace Paley’s fiction or Meridel LeSueur’s *The Girl*.

As part of the tradition of working-class writers, she could be compared with Rebecca Harding Davis’s *Life in the Iron-Mills*, Agnes Smedley’s *Daughter of Earth*, Mike Gold’s *Jews Without Money*, Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*, and Fielding Burke’s *Call Home the Heart*.

As a story exploring the consciousness of one who is dying, students might want to compare *Riddle* to Tolstoi’s *The Death of Ivan Ilych*.

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Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. What is the immediate cause of the conflict in this story? Does the author take sides in this conflict? Does this conflict have a resolution? What underlying causes does it suggest?
2. Try to explain or account for the story’s title. What about the subtitle?
3. Who is the “hero” of this story? Why?
4. This is a story about a woman dying of cancer. Did you find it “depressing” or “inspiring”? Why?
5. Why is Eva so angry about the appearance of the rabbi in the hospital? What does she mean by “Race, human; religion, none”?
6. What do we learn about Eva’s girlhood? Why do we learn it so late in the story?
7. Discuss Jeanne’s role in the story.
8. Is David the same man at the end of the story as he was at the beginning? Explain your answer.

Bibliography

Olsen’s personal/critical essays, those in Silences and that in Mother to Daughter, Daughter to Mother, are very important sources of insight and information. Especially recommended: pp. 5–46 in Silences, “Silences in Literature” (1962), and “One Out of Twelve: Writers Who Are Women in Our Century” (1971).

Other recommended reading:


Muriel Rukeyser (1913–1980)

Contributing Editors: Cary Nelson and Janet Kaufman

Classroom Issues and Strategies

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The earliest poem here, taken from Rukeyser’s second book, dates from 1938; the most recent poems, taken from her last book, date from 1976. These poems thus range across forty years of a career and forty years of American culture and American history. Though there are very strong continuities in Rukeyser’s work, it would be a mistake to imagine that all these poems were written by a single consciousness in a single historical moment. Their diverse forms and rhetorical styles represent the work of a poet who sustained her core beliefs and commitments while responding to changing historical, aesthetic, and cultural opportunities and pressures. She wrote long sequence poems, documentary poems, short lyrics, and elegies.

Of all the responses one might make to this selection, the simplest one—and the one most to be hoped for—is the decision to read more widely in her work. That is, in a way, almost necessitated by this particular selection, since one of the poems, “Absalom,” is taken from a longer poem sequence. Certainly the instructor should read that sequence in its entirety and give the class some sense of the poem’s context. The sequence, “The Book of the Dead,” is available in both her Collected Poems (1979) and the Selected Poems (1992). Readers should be warned that her earlier Selected Poems is not a very successful representation of her work.

Since a number of these poems combine states of consciousness and physical sensation, it is important for students not only to analyze them rhetorically but also to place themselves empathetically inside the poems and read them phenomenologically. What does it feel like to be the mother in “Absalom” who has lost her family to industrial exploitation? What does it feel like to speak in the two very different voices Rukeyser gives her? How can one elaborate on the closing lines of “Martin Luther King, Malcolm X”: “bleeding of my right hand/my black voice bleeding.” These poems are at once gifts to the reader and demands made of us. In “Then,” a poem published shortly before her death, Rukeyser wrote, “When I am dead, even then/I will still love you, I will wait in these poems.”

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

Some of Rukeyser’s major concerns are summarized in the headnote to the poems themselves. Her biography, however, is not, so we sketch it briefly here: Rukeyser was the elder child of upwardly mobile, Jewish, American-born parents. In 1944, at the very moment when the outlines of the Holocaust were becoming known, she opened the seventh poem in her sequence “Letter to the Front” with the startling lines, “To be a Jew in the twentieth century/Is to be offered a gift.” Her father was a partner in a sand-and-gravel company in New York. Seeing the concrete poured for sidewalks and skyscrapers made her feel part of the city; later, somewhat like Hart Crane, she would celebrate technology. From the Ethical Cultural and Fieldston Schools in New York, she went on to study at Vassar and Columbia until her father’s supposed bankruptcy prevented her from continuing. Her mother had expected her to marry and write poetry only as an avocation. Instead, Rukeyser made poetry the focus of her life, traveled, lived in New York and California, and bore and raised a son as a single mother.
Her career as an activist began when she traveled to Alabama to cover the trial of the Scottsboro boys and was arrested. In 1972 she went to Vietnam with Denise Levertov on an unofficial writers’ peace mission. She taught at the California Labor School in the mid-forties and from the mid-fifties through the sixties at Sarah Lawrence. She taught children in Harlem and led writing classes for women in the seventies. Especially in her later years Rukeyser broke taboos about female sexuality. In poems like “Waiting for Icarus” and “Myth” she rewrote classical myths from a woman’s perspective. Here in “Rite” she dramatizes the culture’s investments in gender and in “The Poem as Mask” overturns gender dichotomy by treating it as a constructed myth. In a culture that does not recognize the sexuality of old age, Rukeyser celebrated it. She never labeled her sexuality, but in poetry and letters she celebrated her intimate relations with both women and men.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

“Absalom” is the ninth of twenty poems in Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead” in her 1938 book *U.S. 1*. A number of the poems are given over to the perspective of individual figures in the Gauley Tunnel tragedy. Stylistically, the poem is unusual for shifting from journalistic reportage to interior monologue to lyrical description. It mixes public rhetoric and private speech, judges America’s history and its contemporary institutions, and interrogates natural and industrial power. It is one of the most important modern poems in mixed forms and one of the major achievements of her career.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

As with all socially conscious and progressive poetry read within a discipline that has doubts about its viability, it is important to raise both general intellectual issues and questions that lead students to read closely. Here are a few examples:

1. Compare and contrast how several white poets and several black poets deal with issues of race—perhaps Rukeyser, Genevieve Taggard, Kay Boyle, Jean Toomer, Gwendolyn Bennett, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes.
2. Rukeyser’s “Absalom” is a 1930s poem that would have been read at the time as part of the proletarian literature movement. Compare this with the 1930s poems in “A Sheaf of Political Poetry in the Modern Period.”
3. Read about the classical myths behind “The Minotaur” and “The...
Poem as Mask: Orpheus” and discuss how Rukeyser adapts and transforms them.

4. What model of political action is put forward in “How We Did It”? What does the poem say about means and ends?

5. “Rite” manages with its economical phrasing to both describe a rite and enact one. Are they different?

Robert Hayden (1913–1980)

Contributing Editor: Robert M. Greenberg

Classroom Issues and Strategies

It’s important to get students to fully appreciate Hayden’s effects of sound, image, and atmosphere. For better appreciation of the poems’ aural qualities, have students read such selections as “Summertime and the Living” and “Mourning Poem for the Queen of Sunday” out loud.

Discuss a condensed narrative poem such as “Tour 5” as a short story. This should permit a discussion of the evolving point of view of the travelers and the evolving psychological quality of the imagery.

Point out also Hayden’s control of voice. “Mourning Poem,” for example, is spoken in the idiom of the black church, as if by a chorus of mourners; and if one reads the final lines to mean that the congregation did suspect her of misbehaving, then the poem becomes a masterpiece of wryness and irony.

Students are interested in questions like the following:

1. Is it possible to be both an ethnic and a universal (or liberal humanist) writer? What constitutes universality? What constitutes successful treatment of ethnic material?

2. Can a writer from a minority group write for a general educated audience without giving up in resonance what is gained in breadth of audience and reference?

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Major themes are tension between the imagination and the tragic nature of life; the past in the present; the nurturing power of early life and ethnically colored memories.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions
Precede discussion of form and style with a discussion of the function of a particular type of poem. For example, Hayden wrote spirit-of-place poems such as “Tour 5,” which depend heavily on imagery; folk character poems such as “Mourning Poem for the Queen of Sunday,” which depend on economy of characterization and humor; and early neighborhood poems such as “Summertime and the Living,” which depend on realism mixed with nostalgia, fancy, or psychological symbolism.

**Original Audience**

It is important to realize Hayden always wrote for a general literate audience, not exclusively or even primarily for a black audience. The issue of audience for him relates to the issue of the role of a poet.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

Compare Yeats as an ethnic-universal poet to Hayden.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

1. “Tour 5”
   (a) Discuss the human situation the poem describes. Consider its treatment of both the external and internal aspects of the experience for the travelers.
   (b) Discuss the allusive quality of the adjectives used in the first stanza to convey a festive mood and in the last three lines to convey the violence of the Civil War and the cruelty of slavery.
   (c) Discuss what makes this a poem of the first order. Conciseness, controlled intensity, human drama, eloquence, and powerful symbols are some of the qualities you might touch on.

2. “Summertime and the Living”
   (a) Discuss Hayden’s use of a third-person retrospective point of view to write about childhood. (It gives him the ability to be both inside and outside the child’s perspective.)
   (b) Discuss the sound of words and their connection with sense. Hayden is highly conscious of the aural dimension of language.
   (c) What is the function of the title, which is taken from a song in George and Ira Gershwin’s opera *Porgy and Bess*?

3. “Mourning Poem for the Queen of Sunday”
   (a) Discuss the viewpoint of the speakers about the murdered diva. Discuss the final two lines. Are they at all ironic? Are the speakers totally surprised?
   (b) Discuss the importance of tone throughout the poem.
   (c) Discuss the poem’s atmosphere and how elements other than tone contribute to the black church feeling.
Bibliography


Theodore Roethke (1908–1963)

Contributing Editor: Janis Stout

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

*Personal Background:* Roethke had extremely ambivalent feelings about his father, who was managing partner in a large greenhouse operation in Saginaw, Michigan. He also had problems relating to alcohol addiction and bipolar disorder, which resulted in periods of hospitalization. All of these personal tensions are confronted in his poetry.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

“Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartze”

The three “ancient ladies” preside over processes of growth (both vegetable and the poet’s own) almost as personifications of natural forces, or even the three Fates. Their presence, like Mother Nature’s, is somewhat ambiguous; there is a note of threat in their tickling of the child and in their night presence. The three women’s vigor and authority should be noted, as well as their avoidance of limitation by sex-role stereotypes: clearly female (they wear skirts, they have a special association with the child), they also climb ladders and stand astride the steam-pipes providing heat in the greenhouse.

“Root Cellar”

“Root Cellar” and “Big Wind” represent the celebrated “greenhouse poems,” a group characterized by close attention to details evident only to one who knows this particular world very well—as Roethke did. They are
distinguished from, say, Wordsworth’s nature poems in that they celebrate equally the natural processes themselves and the human effort and control involved. They share Wordsworth’s ability to appreciate the humble or homely elements of nature. Here, in particular, we see Roethke’s wonder at the sheer life process even when manifested in forms that would ordinarily seem ugly or repellent.

“Big Wind”

We might say “Big Wind” celebrates the tenacity of human effort in the face of hostile natural forces, an effort that wrests out of chaos the beauty of the roses. However, that idea should not be pressed so far as to exclude the creative force of natural vitality. Nature and human effort join together in producing roses. The greenhouse itself, shown as a ship running before the storm, seems almost a living thing.

“The Lost Son”

“The Lost Son” illustrates three major elements in Roethke’s work: sur-realistic style; reflection of his own psychological disorders; and mysticism, his vision of spiritual wholeness as a merging of the individual consciousness with natural processes and life-forms.

2. “The Return” associates wellness with the greenhouse world of childhood. The return spoken of is the return of light and heat—of full heat, since the greenhouses would scarcely have been left unheated on winter nights. The plants are both an object of the poet’s close observation and a representation of his life.

“Meditations of an Old Woman”

Probably the most far-reaching question that can be asked of students, but also the most difficult, is, What difference does it make that the speaker is an old woman? Old, we can understand; we think of wisdom, experience, release from the distractions of youth. But why not an old man? One tempting answer is that our society has typically seen passivity and the passive virtues (patience, for instance) as feminine.

“Elegy”

Not often anthologized, this funerary tribute approaches a fusion of comedy with high seriousness. Aunty Tilly is a wonderfully strong, assertive, independent-minded woman who both fulfills traditional roles (housewife, cook, nurse, tender of the dead) and transcends them. The comedy emerges in the last stanza when Aunt Tilly comes “bearing down” on the butcher who, knowing he has met his match, quails before her indomitability and her clarity of vision.

Bibliography

Balakian Peter. *Theodore Roethke’s Far Fields: The Evolution of His*


Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979)

*Contributing Editor: C. K. Doreski*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

Bishop’s poems are highly accessible and do not present problems for most mature readers. I have found that more students come to hear the poetry of Bishop when they commit some of her work to memory. I often challenge students to find the poetry first and then discuss the theme. This encourages them to begin to find relationships among form, language, and topic.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Bishop’s voice communicates rather directly to beginning readers of poetry. What is difficult to convey is the depth of expression and learning evidenced in these poems. Her work shows not merely experience but wisdom, the ability to reflect upon one’s life, and that makes some poems difficult for younger readers.

For younger women readers, Bishop often seems old-fashioned, fussy, or detached. This perplexed the poet in that she felt that she had lived her life as an independent woman. This “generation gap” often provides an interesting class opportunity to talk about historical, cultural, and class assumptions in literature—and how those issues affect us as readers.

Students are often quite taken by Bishop’s regard for animals. With the spirit of a Darwinian naturalist, the poet is willing to accord the natural world intrinsic rights and purposes. The dream-fusion world of the Man-Moth provides many students with an opportunity to discover this avenue into Bishop’s world.

**Original Audience**

Bishop presents a curious “generational” case in that the circumstances of her childhood (raised by her maternal grandparents and an aunt) skew some of her references in favor of an earlier time. The kitchen setting in “Sestina” (not in this anthology), for example, seems more old-fashioned than Robert Lowell’s interior scenes in “91 Revere Street.” Otherwise her poems may be seen as timely—or timeless.
Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

In the British lyric tradition, Bishop, by admission and allusion, draws heavily from Herbert, Hopkins, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Keats, and Blake. Most pertinent American contrasts are with her mentor Marianne Moore (large correspondence at the Rosenbach Museum, Philadelphia), her friends Robert Lowell (correspondence at Houghton Library, Harvard University; Vassar College Library, Poughkeepsie), and May Swenson (correspondence at Washington University Library, St. Louis).

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. “The Man-Moth”
   (a) This is but one of Bishop’s many dream poems. In what ways does Bishop demonstrate her interest in and reliance upon surrealism?
   (b) How does Bishop attempt to humanize her exile through a multitude of sensory impressions? Are they effective?
   (c) The final stanza addresses the reader. How does Bishop intensify her creature’s humanity through his ultimate vulnerability? Are we made to feel like the man-moth?

2. “Filling Station”
   (a) As Bishop describes setting and inhabitants of this “family filling station,” she deliberately builds upon the initial observation, “Oh, but it is dirty!” Why dwell upon and develop this commentary? Does it suggest a missing family member? Is this station without a feminine presence?
   (b) The scale of the poem seems deliberately diminutive. Does this intensify the feminine quality of the poem? Is this intentional?
   (c) The closing stanza returns a sense of order or at least purpose to this scene. The symmetry of the cans lulls the “high-strung automobiles” into calmness. With the final line, “Somebody loves us all,” does Bishop suggest a religious or maternal caretaker for this family?

3. Describe the voice and tone in a single poem. The casual humor of Bishop’s world is often missed by casual readers (obsessed with travel and loss as themes).

4. Bishop owes much to her surrealist heritage. Sleep and dream states animate the worlds of the “Man-Moth” and “Crusoe in England.” Such an essay would allow students to discover a new topical frame for discussion of experience, language, and poetic form.

5. A useful technical assignment would be to discuss Bishop’s reliance upon simile rather than metaphor as her chief poetic device to link her world with the reader’s. It says something critical about Bishop’s belief in the limits of shared knowledge, experience.

Bibliography

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Primary Works


Secondary Works


Robert Lowell, Jr. (1917–1977)

Contributing Editor: Linda Wagner-Martin

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Lowell’s poetry is more difficult than readers expect, deceptively difficult. Since many students come to him expecting an accessible poet (after all, he’s one of those “confessionals”), they sometimes resent having to mine his poems for the background and the allusive sources they contain. Attention to an explicative preparation usually helps. “New Critical” methods are very appropriate.
Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

The combination of the historical with the personal is one of Lowell’s most pervasive themes. His illustrious and prominent family (the Lowells) created a burden for both his psyche and his art. The reader must know history to read Lowell. The human mind in search, moving with intuitive understanding (as opposed to a reliance on fact), sometimes succeeding, sometimes not, is Lowell’s continuing theme.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

A range of forms must be studied—Lowell is the most formal of poets, even toward the end, with the so-called “notebooks.” Studying his intense revision (hardly a word left unchanged from the original version to the final) and examining his effort to skew natural language into his highly concentrated form are both good approaches.

Original Audience

Consider the whole business of the confessional, as Lowell moved from the historical into his unique blend of the personal and the historical.

Address the issue of location. Boston, the New England area, held not only Lowell’s history but the country’s.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Compare Lowell’s poetry to that of Randall Jarrell, Anne Sexton, Theodore Roethke, Elizabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath.

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2001)

Contributing Editor: D. H. Melhem

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Brooks’s work is generally accessible. Occasionally, however, and more likely in some earlier works, like Annie Allen and individual poems like “Riders to the Blood-red Wrath,” intense linguistic and semantic

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compression present minor difficulties.

My Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice can be used as a guide to her published works. As holds true for most poetry, Brooks’s should be read aloud. In the process, its power (boosted by alliteration), the musicality, and the narrative are vivified.

Students seem taken with Brooks’s identity poems like “The Life of Lincoln West” and the didactic “Ballad of Pearl May Lee,” which was Hughes’s favorite. The narrative aspect seems to be especially appealing. As these are not in this anthology, you may wish to recommend them as extra reading.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

Themes include black pride, black identity and solidarity, black humanism, and caritas, a maternal vision. Historically, racial discrimination; the civil rights movement of the fifties; black rebellion of the sixties; a concern with complacency in the seventies; black leadership.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Brooks was influenced at first by the Harlem Renaissance. Her early work featured the sonnet and the ballad, and she experimented with adaptations of conventional meter. Later development of the black arts movement in the sixties, along with conceptions of a black aesthetic, turned her toward free verse and an abandonment of the sonnet as inappropriate to the times. She retained, however, her interest in the ballad—its musicality and accessibility—and in what she called “verse journalism.”

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

In the early works: Langston Hughes, Emily Dickinson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Merrill Moore, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Claude McKay, Anne Spencer.

In the later works: Amiri Baraka, Haki R. Madhubuti, and again, Hughes.

**Bibliography**

The most useful books on Brooks are the following:


Chronologically discusses each major work in a separate chapter; Copyright © Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.
biographical introduction; biocritical, prosodic, and historical approach; discusses correspondence with first publisher.


The first of six chapters that offer introductions to and interviews with six outstanding black poets who bear some relation to or affinity with Brooks presents a summary of her life and art. Includes a discussion of new work (The Near-Johannesburg Boy, “Winnie” in Gottschalk and the Grande Tarantelle), an essay, “The Black Family,” a new poem, and an interview arranged for the book. This American Book Award–winning work also features Dudley Randall, Haki R. Madhubuti, Sonia Sanchez, Jayne Cortez, and Amiri Baraka.

Other books include the following:


The Beat Movement

Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997)

*Contributing Editor: Linda Wagner-Martin*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

Teaching Ginsberg requires addressing rampant stereotypes about the beats and the kind of art they created; that is, the drug culture, homosexuality, Eastern belief systems, and, most important, the effects of such practices on the poem.

By showing the students what a standard formalist 1950s poem was, I have usually been able to keep them focused on the work itself. Ginsberg’s long-lined, chantlike poems are so responsive to his speech rhythms that once students hear tapes, they begin to see his rationale for form. Connections with Walt Whitman’s work are also useful.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

Ginsberg’s dissatisfaction with America during the 1950s prompted his jeremiads, laments, “Howls.” When his macabre humor could surface, as it does in “A Supermarket in California,” he shows the balance that clear vision can create. His idealism about his country marks much of his work, which is in many ways much less “personal” than it at first seems.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Consider the tradition of American poetry as voice dependent (Whitman and William Carlos Williams) rather than a text for reading. The highly allusive, ornate, “learned” poems of T. S. Eliot or Wallace Stevens have much less influence on Ginsberg’s work, although he certainly knows a great deal about poetry. His poems are what he chose to write, and he makes this choice from a plethora of models. The highly religious influence shapes much of his work (he once described himself as a Buddhist Jew with connections to Krishna, Siva, Allah, Coyote, and the Sacred Heart). Ginsberg was a personal friend of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. It was largely through Buber’s influence that he gave up drugs.

“Howl,” the first part of which appears here, is one of the most famous artifacts of the 1950s. Struggling to recover from the McCarthy trials

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that spelled doom for anyone charged with difference, the late 1950s was the edge of both promise and fear. The 1960s, with their recognition of the value of change and difference, were about to strike every American citizen, but “Howl” when it was first published in 1956 was still a threatening work. (A decade later, when a recording of the poet reading the work was played on radio, people responsible could have lost their jobs.) In alluding to the experiences of the beats, especially Carl Solomon, whom Ginsberg met when both were patients at the Columbia Psychiatric Institute in 1949, the poem brings into focus a quantity of events unknown to the (polite) literary world, a more advantaged world.

It also alludes to the travels of William S. Burroughs, whose first book *Junkie* (1953) was published through Solomon’s efforts; Herbert E. Huncke, a con artist and junkie from New York; and Neal Cassady, a Denver hipster whose travels with Jack Kerouac were re-created in the latter’s *On the Road* (1957). As a collective chronicle, the work draws on a number of people’s experiences—all united in being marginal, offensive, and generally threatening to most academics and students.

Original Audience

Ginsberg’s work can usefully be approached as protest as well as lament. Connections with the writings of racial minorities can help define his own Jewish rhythms.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Walt Whitman
William Carlos Williams
Theodore Roethke
Gary Snyder
Denise Levertov

Robert Creeley
Langston Hughes
Lawrence Ferlinghetti
Etheridge Knight
Pedro Pietri

Jack Kerouac (1922–1969)

Teaching material for Jack Kerouac is available on *The Heath Anthology* web site. (To access the site, please go to the Houghton Mifflin college home page at http://college.hmco.com. Select English, then select *The Heath Anthology* textbook site.)

Lawrence Ferlinghetti (b. 1919)

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Classroom Issues and Strategies

Ferlinghetti’s work is immediately accessible and appealing, and these qualities should be emphasized. He uses everyday language to articulate his themes. A problem could be his critique of social problems in America; conservative students may find him too sharply satiric about their image of this country. You might note that although Ferlinghetti articulates the “outsider” view of society, he also espouses hope for the future; for instance, poems like “Popular Manifest” (not in this anthology) give a sense of vision and expectation.

Tape recordings of Ferlinghetti reading can be effective.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Ferlinghetti is a political activist and his poetical career spans and reflects thirty years of U.S. political history.

His personal voice brings poetry back to the people. He has done this not only as a poet, but as a publisher, editor, translator, and discoverer of new talent.

Significant Form, Style, and Artistic Conventions

Ferlinghetti has been prominently identified with the beat movement of the 1950s. It is important to consider the beat movement as an ongoing part of American bohemianism, and to contrast it, for example, with the expatriate movement of post–World War I.

The hip vocabulary can well be examined, and the beat experience of alienation can be connected with other marginals in the society.

Original Audience

The work of Ferlinghetti can be placed in the specific social context of the beat movement in the fifties—beats were the anarchists in a time of general postwar conformism.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Ferlinghetti can certainly be compared with his fellow beats, like Allen
Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. With this particular poet, the most effective approach is to plunge right into the work. He elicits the questions.
2. Discuss the San Francisco Renaissance, which centered around Ferlinghetti’s City Lights Bookstore.
3. What is the counterculture in America?

Bibliography

General


Particular


Robert Creeley (b. 1926)

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Classroom Issues and Strategies

“Hart Crane”

Dedicated to a friend of Crane who became a friend of Creeley, this is the opening poem in *For Love*. Is it a negative portrait or a sympathetic study of difficulties central to Creeley’s own career? Certainly it contains many leitmotifs of Creeley’s poetry: stuttering, isolations, incompleteness, self-conscious ineptness, the difficulty of utterance, the need for friends, the confrontations of a broken world.

“I Know a Man”

The colloquial anecdote as parable? How does the stammering lineation complicate the swift utterance? Why should the shift in speakers occur with such ambiguous punctuation—a comma splice? According to Creeley, “drive” is said not by the friend but by the speaker.

“For Love”

The closing poem in *For Love*, this is informed by the qualities attributed to Crane in the volume’s opening poem. “For Love” is one of many poems to Bobbie—wife, companion, muse, and mother of children—that wrestle with the nature of love, the difficulty of utterance, and a mass of conflicting feelings: doubt, faith, despair, surprise, self-criticism, gratitude, relief. The poem is a remarkable enactment of a complex and moment-by-moment honesty.

“Words”

This poem drives yet further inward to the ambiguous point where an inarticulate self engages an imperfectly grasped language. Not the wife or muse but “words” seem now the objects of direct address, the poem’s “you.” Nevertheless, the poem’s detailed phrases and its movement through anxious blockage toward an ambiguously blessed release strongly suggest a love poem.

“America”

Though seldom an explicitly political poet, Creeley here brings his sardonic tone and his belief in utterance as our most intimate identity to bear on the question: What has happened to the America that Walt Whitman celebrated? “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem,” Whitman had said in his Preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. And he had often spoken of the “words” belonging to that poem, as in “One’s-Self I Sing” and in the reflections on “the People” in *Democratic Vistas*.

“America” modulates those concerns into Creeley’s own more quizzical language. We may read it as a dark response, a century later, to
Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

In “Projective Verse” Charles Olson quotes Creeley’s remark that “Form is never more than an extension of content.” Creeley liked, as an implicit definition of form, a Blakean aphorism that he learned from Slater Brown: “Fire delights in its form.” His central statement of open poetics, involving “a content which cannot be anticipated,” is “I’m Given to Write Poems” (A Quick Graph, pp. 61–72).

It is useful to know that, when reading his poetry aloud, Creeley always indicates line-ends by means of very brief pauses. The resultant stammer—quite unlike the effect of Williams’s reading—is integral to Creeley’s style, which involves a pervasive sense of wryly humorous or painful groping for the next line.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

William Carlos Williams told Robert Creeley, “You have the subtlest feeling for the measure I have encountered anywhere except in the verses of Ezra Pound.” For Creeley’s relation to Williams, see his essays in A Quick Graph and Paul Mariani, “Robert Creeley,” in A Usable Past (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984). For his relation to Pound, see “A Note on Ezra Pound” (A Quick Graph), and for his sustained and mutually valuable relation to Charles Olson, see again A Quick Graph.

Perhaps the class would like to compare “Hart Crane” with Robert Lowell’s “Words for Hart Crane” in Life Studies. Two views of Crane, two modes of portraiture, and two historically important styles of mid-twentieth-century American verse; these plus “The Broken Tower” itself would make a fascinating unit of study.

Charles Olson (1910–1970)

Contributing Editor: Thomas R. Whitaker

Classroom Issues and Strategies

It will be most practical to approach Olson after some detailed work with poems by T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams. Despite many stylistic similarities, Olson’s poetic “enactment” dictates a different kind of progression and a different use of literary and other allusions. The teacher might suggest that the formalist concept of a “speaker” or
“protagonist” (a character in a poetic drama outside of which the poem’s maker is imagined to stand) might be replaced by the poet himself in the act of writing (a self-reflexive Charles Olson in the drama of making this poem). Although Pound’s *Pisan Cantos*, Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, and Williams’s *Paterson* are partially amenable to this approach, Olson commits himself to it more fully in both shorter and longer forms.

His abstract style, his refusal to commit himself to the modernist “image,” may also be a difficulty. The student can be reminded that all speech, all thought, even an “image,” is the result of an abstractive process. Olson characteristically works with syntax and conceptual reference that are “in process”—often fragmentary, self-revising, incremental—as he struggles to “say” what is adequate to his present (and always changing) moment. Comparisons with Robert Creeley’s often abstract and stammering forward motion may be illuminating.

Those interested in Olson as a teacher and as a collaborator with other poets and artists should consult *Letters for Origin* and *Mayan Letters*, and also Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (1972), and Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (1987) which are richly informative. Duberman also quotes a comment by Merce Cunningham on Olson as a dancer, which may suggest one way of approaching Olson’s poetic style: “I enjoyed him; . . . he was something like a light walrus” (p. 359). For Olson’s own appreciation of Cunningham as a dancer, see the poem “Merce of Egypt,” which is a meditation on man-the-maker that might be compared to “For Sappho, Back.” For the extraordinary intensity and range of Olson’s reading, see Ralph Maud, *Charles Olson’s Reading: A Biography* (1996).

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

“The Kingfishers”

It may be useful for the instructor to have worked through this poem with the help of a commentator, such as Sherman Paul, Thomas Merrill or Ralph Maud. Students can then be encouraged to approach the poem as a meditation on the need for change, and the will to change—as of 1949 but with contemporary applications. The poet sees the need to move beyond Eliot and Pound, beyond the irony and despair of *The Waste Land* and the modern inferno of *The Cantos*, without overlooking the cultural crisis to which they allude. What sources of vitality does he find amid the decay? What suggestions for personal and cultural renewal? And for a new poetic practice? Can we understand this poem on the model of elliptical diary notations by someone who is working toward a statement of position? What are the stages of its progress?

Students with an interest in the poem’s philosophical implications may wish to explore Plutarch’s “The E at Delphi” or G. S. Kirk, *Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments*. Students wondering how “feedback” may relate to social and poetic processes should turn to Norbert Wiener’s *Cybernetics* or *The Human Use of Human Beings*. Of great interest in that direction is also the work of Gregory Bateson; see *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (the chapter on “Cybernetic Explanation”) and *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*.

“For Sappho, Back”

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In some respects more traditional in form and subject than the other Olson poems included here, “For Sappho, Back” might be a useful introduction to Olson’s style for students not at ease with allusive modernism. How does the poem expand the tribute to a specific woman-poet so that it becomes a meditation on woman, nature, and poetry? What specific qualities of Sappho’s style does it allude to? Does Sappho become here a Muse figure or Nature Herself? D. H. Lawrence has said in *Etruscan Places* (which Olson admired) that the Etruscan priest sought an “act of pure attention” directed inward. “To him the blood was the red stream of consciousness itself.” As Olson wrote to the anthropologist Ruth Benedict, “I am alone again working down to the word where it lies in the blood. I continually find myself reaching back and down in order to make sense out of now and to lead ahead.” (See Clark, *Charles Olson*, p. 95.) Does this help us with “Back” in the title and the use of “blood” later? Clark suggests that, on one level, this is a personal love poem, taken by its recipient, Frances Boldereff, to be a “very accurate portrait” of herself (p. 171). Olson often chose to incorporate in such love poems allusions to his wife Constance; can we find such clues here? How, finally, do we relate the historical, personal, and archetypal concerns of this poem?

Robert von Hallberg (*Charles Olson: The Scholar’s Art*, pp. 34–38) offers suggestions for stylistic analysis of the use of fragmentary and self-revising syntax in this poem.

“I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You”

Students might usefully compare this poem to Hart Crane’s “To Brooklyn Bridge”; both are invocations and statements of subject at the outset of modern “personal epics.” One might also consult the preface to Williams’s *Paterson*. What are the social issues in each case? What dominant images are established? What relations does Olson suggest between love and form? How do images gradually accrue additional meanings as the meditation proceeds? Does it help to know that this was happening in the process of composition—and that in an earlier draft “next second,” was “next/second”? (See Clark, *Charles Olson*, p. 166.)

“Maximus, to himself ”

As a self-assessment, this poem might usefully be compared with Creeley’s “For Love.” Both have the air of spontaneous meditation; both deal largely in abstractions; both are sharply self-critical. To what degree is the form of each an “extension of content”? How, in each, does a seemingly unplanned meditation assume the form of a coherent monologue, moving through a problem toward its momentary resolution?

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Gary Snyder (b. 1930)

*Contributing Editor: Thomas R. Whitaker*
Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

“Riprap”

As Snyder tells us in his first volume, riprap is “a cobble of stone laid on steep, slick rock to make a trail for horses in the mountains.” In *Myths & Texts* (p. 43), he calls poetry “a riprap on the slick rock of metaphysics.” This poem may suggest the “objectivism” of William Carlos Williams—“No ideas but in things”—and yet it finally evokes an infinite, ever-changing system of worlds and thoughts. Such idealism, of course, also enters Williams’s *Paterson*. Central to the poetics of both Williams and Snyder are strategies that enable particulars to evoke a pattern and so provide a link with the universal. What strategies can the class find here? Some poems for comparison: “Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout” and “Pirite Creek” in *Riprap*, and “For Nothing” in *Turtle Island*—all concerned to relate “thing” and “mind” or “form” and “emptiness.”

“Vapor Trails”

How does this poem relate aesthetic patterns, natural patterns, and the patterns of human violence? Is the poem finally a lament over such violence? Or a discovery of its beauty? Or a resignation to its naturalness? Or all or none of these? Can the class trace the shifting tone of the meditation from beginning to end?

This poem, too, has affinities with Williams’s work. See, for example, such studies of symmetry and craft as “On Gay Wallpaper” and “Fine Work with Pitch and Copper.” Does the ironic use of “design” at the end of “Vapor Trails” obliquely recall the concerns of Robert Frost’s “Design”?

“Wave”

This poem, like others in *Regarding Wave*, links various manifestations of energy—inorganic, organic, sexual, linguistic, mental—through images and etymologies that evoke a cosmic wave, motion, or dance. Snyder’s riprap, a human construction that enables a mental ascent, seems now to have yielded more fully to the perception of patterns inherent in natural process, patterns in which we dancingly participate.

Wave: wife. As that analogy develops, does the poem suggest that nature is our muse and that the energy of all sentience and all cosmic process is fundamentally sexual?

Would the class enjoy some visual analogies to “the dancing grain of things/of my mind”? If so, you might look at the photographs and calligraphy in Lao Tsu, *Tao Te Ching*, translated by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English (New York: Random House, 1972).

“It Was When”

This reverie over moments when Snyder’s son Kai might have been conceived is both a love poem to his wife Masa and a celebration of the “grace” manifest in their coming together. Its imagery, cadences, and

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reverence for vital processes strongly recall the poetry of D. H. Lawrence. The class might like to make comparisons with Lawrence’s “Gloire de Dijon” and perhaps other poems in Look! We Have Come Through! “It Was When” is a densely woven pattern of alliteration and assonance. How do those sound effects cooperate with the poem’s cadences and its meanings? You may want to consult other poems in Regarding Wave that continue Snyder’s meditation on his marriage and Kai’s birth: “The Bed in the Sky,” “Kai, Today,” and “Not Leaving the House.”

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Snyder often plays variations on the imagist mode in which Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams did much of their earlier work. D. H. Lawrence’s love poems and animal poems are also important antecedents, as are Kenneth Rexroth’s meditations amid Western landscapes and his translations from Japanese poetry.

Central to the poetics of both Williams and Snyder are strategies that enable particulars to evoke a pattern and so provide a link with the universal.

Bibliography


Denise Levertov (1923–1997)

Contributing Editor: Joan F. Hallisey

Classroom Issues and Strategies

With an adequate introduction to her life and works, Denise Levertov is not a difficult author. Levertov can best be made accessible to students when they are familiar with the poet’s own prose reflections on poetry, the role of the poet, and “notes” on organic form. You might prepare an introduction to her work by making reference to her quite precise discussion of these themes in The Poet in the World (1973); Light Up the Cave (1982); and New and Selected Essays (1992).

Consider using tapes of Levertov reading her own poetry. The most recent cassette, “The Acolyte” (Watershed), contains a fine sampling from her earlier poetry through Oblique Prayers. Encourage students to listen both to her poetry readings and interviews and to incorporate information from

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them in class or seminar discussions and presentations or as material for research papers. When students are doing a class presentation, strongly urge them to be certain that their classmates have copies of the poems they will be discussing.

Students respond favorably to Levertov’s conviction that the poet writes more than “[she] knows.” They also respond positively to the fact that an American woman “engaged” poet has spoken out strongly on women’s rights, peace and justice issues, race, and other questions on human rights.

Students may ask you if Levertov is discouraged in the face of so much darkness and disaster evident in the late twentieth century. This presents a good opportunity to have the students examine “Writing in the Dark” and “The May Mornings” (Candles in Babylon, 1982) and her essay “Poetry, Prophecy, Survival” (New and Selected Essays, 1992).

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Levertov’s work is concerned with several dimensions of the human experience: love, motherhood, nature, war, the nuclear arms race, mysticism, poetry, and the role of the poet. If you are teaching a women’s literature course or an upper-level course focusing on a few writers, several of these themes might be examined. In a survey course, you might concentrate on three themes that include both historical and personal issues: poetry, the role of the poet, and her interest in humanitarian politics.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Levertov in “Some Notes on Organic Form” tells the reader that during the writing of a poem the various elements of the poet’s being are in communion with one another and heightened. She believes that ear and eye, intellect and passion, interrelate more subtly than at other times, and she regards the poet’s “checking for accuracy,” for precision of language that must take place throughout the writing as a “matter of one element supervising the others but of intuitive interaction between all the elements involved” (The Poet in the World, p. 9).

Like Wordsworth and Emerson, Levertov sees content and form as being in a state of dynamic interaction. She sees rhyme, echo, reiteration as serving not only to knit the elements of an experience “but also as being the means, the sole means, by which the density of texture and the returning or circling of perception can be transmuted into language, apperceived” (Ibid., p. 9).

You might point out that as an artist who is “obstinately precise” about her craft, Levertov pays close attention to etymologies as she searches for the right words, the right image, the right arrangement of the lines on the page. It will be helpful for students to be able to recognize other poetic techniques that Levertov uses in her poetry: enjambment, color, contrast, and even the pun to sustain conflict and ambiguity. Levertov will sometimes make use of the juxtaposition of key words and line breaks.

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Levertov does not consider herself a member of any particular school.

**Original Audience**

Levertov has said, on several occasions, that she never has readers in mind when she is writing a poem. She believes that a poem has to be not merely addressed to a person or a problem *out there*; but must come from *in here*, the inner being of the poet, and it must also address something *in here*.

It is important to share Levertov’s ideas with the students when you discuss audience. One might stress the universality of some themes: familial and cultural heritage, poetry, and the role of the poet/prophet in a “time of terror.” There is a “timeless” kind of relevance for these themes, and they need not be confined to any one age.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

There is enough evidence to suggest that a fruitful comparison might be made between several of Muriel Rukeyser’s finest poems (“Akiba,” “Kathe Kollwitz” [*Speed of Darkness*, 1968], “Searching/Not Searching” [*Breaking Open*, 1973]) and some of Levertov’s poems on comparable themes.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

1. (a) What kinds of feelings do you have about the Holocaust? About nuclear war?
   (b) What do you think the role of the poet should be today? Do you think she or he should speak out about political or social issues? Why? Why not?
2. (a) Several of Levertov’s poems can be used for a writing sample and subsequent discussion at the beginning of the course. Brief poems that students respond strongly to are: “The Broken Sandal” (*Relearning the Alphabet*), “Variation on a Theme from Rilke” (*Breathing the Water*), and “The Batterers” and “Eye Mask” (*Evening Train*, 1992).
   (b) One might give a short assignment to compare the themes, tone, and imagery of Levertov’s “The Broken Sandal” with Adrienne Rich’s “Prospective Immigrants—Please Note.”
   (c) Examine several of Levertov’s poems on poetry and the role of the poet in light of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s call for the “true” poet in several of his essays, most notably in “The Poet,” “Poetry and the Imagination,” and “The American Scholar.”

**Bibliography**

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Denise Levertov’s The Poet in the World (1973); Light Up the Cave (1982); and New and Selected Essays (1992) are essential primary source materials for a deeper understanding of the poems included in the text.

“The Sense of Pilgrimage” essay in The Poet in the World and “Beatrice Levertoff ” in Light Up the Cave offer valuable background material for teaching “Illustrious Ancestors.”

Levertov has acknowledged the significant influence of Rilke on her poetry and poetics throughout her career, and several of her recent “Variation on a Theme from Rilke” poems will be enriched by Edward Zlotkowski’s insightful essay “Levertov and Rilke: A Sense of Aesthetics” in Twentieth Century Literature, Fall 1992.

Audrey Rodger’s Denise Levertov’s Poetry of Engagement will be helpful in discussing Levertov’s understanding of the role of the poet and her poetry of engagement.

Frank O’Hara (1926–1966)

Contributing Editor: David Bergman

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Frank O’Hara’s works look so effortless, spontaneous, so stitched from his daily life, that students may forget just how hard it is to make things look easy. It is important to stress the ways the poems are drawn from his life, more than a laundry list of “I do this, I do that.” For example, in “The Day Lady Died,” the precise and banal details of his train schedule and the presents he is bringing set the stage for the memory of Billie Holiday, a memory that seems to exist out of time. It is Holiday who breaks through the hustle and bustle of his life and has captured through her art—her voice—something nearly eternal. Although she had “stopped breathing” in reality, in his memory of her it is the audience who is dead and she is the one most alive.

O’Hara’s connection to abstract expressionism is well established. It might be helpful to show the work of Mike Goldberg, Willem De Kooning, or Grace Hartigan. You might want to discuss the relationship between action painting and O’Hara’s aesthetic, especially as developed in “Why I Am Not a Painter.”

O’Hara studied music, and for quite a time believed he would become a composer. He worked with Ned Rorem and was a friend of Virgil Thomson. (The Rorem/O’Hara collaboration is available on CD [PHCD 116].) Invite students to read the poems aloud. One discovers a subtle music in them. O’Hara diverges from modernist poets because of his emphasis on voice rather than on image. For all of his interest in painting, it is the immediacy of O’Hara’s voice that is the most striking part of his poetry.

Some teachers are afraid to address the homosexual content of his poems. I have discovered that addressing the issue as just one more subject reduces...
the students' discomfort. If students remain uncomfortable, the best position to state is, “We are all grown-ups here. We must be ready to confront attitudes and positions we both share and do not share.”

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

Like John Ashbery, O’Hara’s friend and fellow Harvard alumnus, O’Hara is always concerned with time and mutability. These questions of time spawn several subthemes: (1) the relationship of art to time (can art take us out of time?); (2) the weakness of the body, its susceptibility to disease, death, and pain; (3) the fleetingness of emotions, particularly love; (4) the pressure of friends and the difficulties of maintaining the bonds of friendship.

Openness is a key word for O’Hara. He wants his poems and his love to be open. We can discuss open poetic forms, open relationships, openness to experience, a willingness to court vulgarity and sentimentality. But openness makes one vulnerable. O’Hara is haunted by this sense of vulnerability to outside enemies and forces. In some ways this mirrors the American psyche of the Cold War—its sense of strength, its desire to be an open society, and its fears—frequently irrational—of enemy attack.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

O’Hara’s work is free verse, but as the footnote suggests, “Poem” echoes Shakespeare’s sonnet “When in disgrace to fortune and men’s eyes.” It might be useful to look at how the form of the sonnet, although not copied, haunts the structure of this poem. O’Hara’s line breaks look arbitrary, but they often are extremely effective.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

O’Hara’s work is often compared to John Ashbery’s. One can see their wit, humor, and desire to incorporate things from daily life into their work. But whereas these poems are open to the reader, Ashbery’s poems often are hermetic. Allen Ginsberg was also one of O’Hara’s friends. The homoerotic world of “A Supermarket in California” compares with O’Hara’s “Poem.” O’Hara disliked Robert Lowell’s poetry. Lowell’s formalism and highly wrought poetic surface contrasts strongly with O’Hara’s work of the same period.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

Students may be encouraged to try their own I-do-this-I-do-that poems and see why the details in O’Hara’s add up to something much more than a list.
of appointments. What are the similarities and differences between poetry and the other arts? How autobiographical should a poem be? How distanced from the poet's life does a poem have to be to affect a reader? Do the names of so many of O'Hara's personal friends keep the poem from communicating to you as a reader, or does this specificity—even if you don't know who these people are exactly—make the experience seem more immediate? When does gossip become art? How does O'Hara's expression of homosexual love differ from heterosexual love? Or does it?

James Wright (1927–1980)

*Contributing Editor: George S. Lensing*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

The poems of Wright, on the surface, seem simple and accessible. Yet they also seem distinctively “poetic.” Students might be asked to discuss how and why the poems are both simple and poetic. This could easily lead to a discussion of images in the poems, and examples from any of the four included here might be used.

Another strategy might be to consider Wright as a social poet addressing American society in the 1960s and 1970s. Ask the students what impression of America during those decades emerges from the poems. How, from the poems in the text, can you justify Wright’s identity with those individuals outside middle-class American society? Who are these individuals? What do they have in common? What is the nature of their appeal to Wright?

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

A typical theme explored in Wright’s poetry is rural America versus the modern urban America of the middle class with its wealth, political power, and control over the oppressed. This theme was particularly relevant in the America of the 1960s and 1970s when Wright wrote. America was involved in the Vietnam War, and Wright sees that involvement as a kind of national illness.

Both a theme and a technique is Wright’s movement inward and within the self, often through a rural or small-town setting. Images in particular lead him inwardly toward moments of sudden self-revelation: (“Flayed without hope, I held the man for nothing in my arms” in “Saint Judas,” or “I have wasted my life” in “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota.”

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Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

The “how” of a poem by Wright is intrinsic to the “what.” Here, the participation of Wright in the “deep image” movement is important. “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota” is a good example to illustrate that movement. The poet is located at the farm of a friend; he is recumbent in a hammock. His mind is not operating in the usual logical and rational way but is dreamlike and given to random associations. The boundaries between human and nonhuman life are being erased through various kinds of personifications: the butterfly is “asleep” and “Blowing like a leaf.” Cowbells “follow one another.” Droppings “Blaze up.” Images define the poet’s free play of mind as he moves from the sight of the butterfly, to the sound of the cowbells, to the droppings of the horses, to the darkening of the evening, to the flying chicken hawk. The timing of the images and their cumulative play upon each other are crucial to this process. They are images of beauty, of metamorphosis in some cases, of things in their proper and natural locations. (The chicken hawk is “looking for home” and will undoubtedly find it.) However, the title tells us that the poet is not in his usual location, but the farm of a friend. Now he is profoundly drawn in to the images that surround him. The poem suddenly “leaps” to its conclusion: “I have wasted my life.” That leaping occurs among the images that surround him and that startle him abruptly into a knowledge of himself. But the connection is not made through narrative exposition; it is left to the reader’s own association and recognition of the images and their timing. The process has not been rational but almost surreal. This poem and other poems of the deep image depend upon the successful “leaps” and their effect upon the reader. How much does Wright’s self-revelation, for example, become our own?

Original Audience

Poetry and poetry readings were very popular during the 1960s in America, especially on campuses where the resistance to the Vietnam War was also often centered. Wright gave many public readings at American colleges. His reputation grew steadily over the course of his career and was shortened by his death from cancer at the age of fifty-two.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

An important influence upon Wright was the poet Robert Bly. (See The Heath Anthology headnote for Wright.) But other poets, like William Stafford, Louis Simpson, Robert Creeley, and Gary Snyder, were also writing in a similar mode; they knew and influenced each other. Wright also translated poetry by figures like Georg Trakl, Cesar Vallejo, Pablo Neruda, Juan Ramon Jimenez, and others. Their poems became important influences on his own work. An important magazine owned and edited by Bly—called
Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. How is the figure of Judas, the betrayer of Christ, presented in the early sonnet “Saint Judas”? How does Judas anticipate and prefigure other outsiders in Wright’s poems—especially little Crow in “A Centen-ary Ode: Inscribed to Little Crow, Leader of the Sioux Rebellion in Minnesota, 1862”?

2. How is American society during the 1960s and 1970s depicted in Wright’s poetry?

3. How do the various images in the poems and their “leaping” relation to one another lead to the conclusions usually expressed in the poems’ last sentence?
Sylvia Plath (1932–1963)

Contributing Editor: Linda Wagner-Martin

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students usually begin with the fact that Plath committed suicide and then read her death as some kind of “warning” to talented, ambitious women writers. (The recent biography by Stevenson only supports this view, unfortunately.) What must be done is to get to the text, in each case, and read for nuance of meaning—humor, anger, poignance, intellectual tour de force. Running parallel with this sense of Plath as some inhuman persona is a fearful acknowledgment that women who have ambition are not quite normal. Plath receives a very gender-based reading. A good corrective is to talk about people who have tendencies toward depression, a situation that affects men as well as women.

Focus on the text and ready information about the possible biographical influence on that text. Often, however, the influences are largely literary—Medea is as close a persona for some of the late poems as Plath herself—T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, W. S. Merwin, W. B. Yeats, etc. Criticism is just now starting to mine these rich areas. Some attention to the late 1950s and early 1960s is also helpful: seeing the poetry and The Bell Jar as the same kind of breakthrough into the expression of women’s anger as Betty Friedan’s or Simone de Beauvoir’s is useful.

Hearing Plath read from her own late work is effective: She has an unusual, almost strident voice, and the humor and gutsiness of the 1962 poems come across well. Caedmon has one recording that has many of the late poems backed with Plath’s interview with Peter Orr for the BBC, taped on October 30, 1962 (many of the poems she reads were written just that week, or shortly before). The PBS Voices and Visions Plath segment is also fairly accurate and effective.

As mentioned above, the fact of Plath’s suicide seems primary in many students’ minds. Partly because many of them have read, or know of, The Bell Jar, it is hard to erase the image of the tormented woman, ill at ease in her world. But once that issue is cleared, and her writing is seen as a means of keeping her alive, perhaps the study of that writing becomes more important to students: It seems to have a less than esoteric “meaning.”

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Themes include women’s place in American culture (even though Plath lived the last three years in England, thinking wrongly that she had more freedom in England to be a writer); what women can attempt; how coerced they were by social norms (i.e., to date, marry, have children, be a helpmeet, support charities); the weight society places on women—to be the only support of children, to earn livings (Plath’s life, echoing her mother’s very
difficult one, with little money and two children for whom she wanted the best of opportunities); the need for superhuman talent, endurance, and resourcefulness in every woman’s life.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Versatility of form (tercet, villanelle, many shapes of organic form, syl-labics), use of rhyme (and its variations, near rhyme, slant rhyme, assonance), word choice (mixed vocabularies)—Plath must be studied as an expert, compelling poet, whose influence on the contemporary poetry scene—poems written by men as well as women—has been inestimable. Without prejudicing readers, the teacher must consider what “confessional” poetry is: the use of seemingly “real” experience, experience that often is a supreme fiction rather than personal biography; a means of making art less remote from life by using what might be life experience as its text. Unfortunately, as long as only women poets or poets with abnormal psychiatric histories are considered “confessional,” the term is going to be ineffective for a meaningful study of contemporary poetry.

**Original Audience**

Although most of Plath’s best poems were written in the early 1960s, the important point to be made is that today’s readers find her work immediate. Her expression of distrust of society, her anger at the positions talented women were asked to take in that society, were healthful (and rare) during the early 1960s, so she became a kind of voice of the times in the same way Ernest Hemingway expressed the mood of the 1920s. But while much of Hemingway’s work seems dated to today’s students (at least his ethical and moral stances toward life), Plath’s writing has gained currency.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

The most striking comparison can be made between the early work of Anne Sexton and Plath (Plath learned a lot from Sexton), and to a lesser extent, the poems of Theodore Roethke. W. D. Snodgrass’s long poem “Heart’s Needle” was an important catalyst for both Sexton and Plath, as was some of Robert Lowell’s work. If earlier Plath poems are used, Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot are key. And, in moderation, Ted Hughes’s early work can be useful—especially the animal and archaic tones and images.

**Bibliography**

Susan Van Dyne’s essays on the manuscripts are invaluable (see *Centennial Review*, Summer 1988). See also the *Massachusetts Review* essay, collected in Wagner’s *Sylvia Plath: Critical Essays* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984) and Van Dyne’s 1993 book from the University of North Carolina Press.

Wagner’s Routledge collection, *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*
Linda Bundtzen’s *Plath’s Incarnations* (University of Michigan Press, 1983), Steven Axelrod’s 1990 *Sylvia Plath, The Wound and the Cure of Wounds*, along with the Wagner-Martin biography of Plath, are useful. See also Linda Wagner-Martin’s *Plath’s The Bell Jar, A Novel of the Fifties* (1992).

Anne Sexton (1928–1974)

*Contributing Editor: Diana Hume George*

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Anne Sexton’s poetry teaches superbly. It is accessible, challenging, richly textured, and culturally resonant. Her work is equally appropriate for use in American literature, women’s studies, and poetry courses. The selections in this text represent many of the diverse subjects and directions of her work.

Three problems tend to recur in teaching Sexton; all are interrelated. First, the “confessional school” context is troublesome because that subgenre in American poetry is both misnamed and easily misunderstood; Sexton has been the subject of inordinately negative commentary as the first prominent woman poet writing in this mode. Second, contemporary readers, despite the feminist movement, often have difficulty dealing with Sexton’s explicitly bodily and female subject matter and imagery. Finally, readers often find her poetry depressing, especially the poems that deal with suicide, death, and mental illness.

If the course emphasizes historical context, a sympathetic and knowledgeable explanation of resistance to the confessional mode is helpful. (Ironically, if historical context is not important to presentation of the material, I suggest not mentioning it at all.) Academic and public reactions to the women’s movement, even though Sexton did not deliberately style herself as a feminist poet, will help to make students understand the depth and extent of her cultural and poetic transgressions. The third problem is most troubling for teaching Sexton; teachers might emphasize the necessity for literature to confront and deal with controversial and uncomfortable themes such as suicide, mortality, madness. A discussion of the dangers of equating creativity and emotional illness might be helpful, even necessary, for some students. It’s also important to demonstrate that Sexton wrote many poems of celebration, as well as of mourning.

Students often want to know how and why Sexton killed herself. They want to disapprove, yet they are often fascinated. I recommend one of two approaches. Either avoid the whole thing by not mentioning her suicide and by directing students toward the poems and away from Sexton’s life; or engage the issue directly, in which case you need to allow some time to make thoughtful responses and guide a useful discussion that will illuminate more than one life and death.
Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

A balanced presentation of Sexton would include mention of her major themes, most of which are touched upon in the selection of poems here: religious quest, transformation and dismantling of myth, the meanings of gender, inheritance and legacy, the search for fathers, mother-daughter relationships, sexual anxiety, madness and suicide, issues of female identity.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

The problem of placement in the confessional school can be turned into an advantage by emphasizing Sexton’s groundbreaking innovations in style and subject matter. Sexton’s early poetry was preoccupied with form and technique; she could write in tightly constrained metrical forms, as demonstrated in To Bedlam and Part Way Back and All My Pretty Ones. She wrote in free verse during the middle and late phases of her poetic career. Most important is her gift for unique imagery, often centering on the body or the household.

Original Audience

Many of Sexton’s readers have been women, and she has perhaps a special appeal for female readers because of her domestic imagery. She also found a wide readership among people who have experienced emotional illness or depression. But Sexton’s appeal is wider than a specialist audience. She is exceptionally accessible, writes in deliberately colloquial style, and her diversity and range are such that she appeals to students from different backgrounds.
Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Among other confessinals, she can be discussed in context with Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, W. D. Snodgrass. Among women poets, she shares concerns of subject and style with Adrienne Rich, Denise Levertov, Sylvia Plath, Alicia Ostriker, and, in a different way, Maxine Kumin. It’s also appropriate to mention her similarities to Emily Dickinson, another female New England poet who wrote in unconventional ways about personal subjects, religion, and mortality. Because she was a religious poet whose work is part of the questing tradition, she might be usefully compared with John Donne and George Herbert. Since many of her poems are spoken from the perspective of a child speaker, the standard literary tradition for comparative purposes can include Blake and Wordsworth, Vaughan and Traherne. Extra-literary texts that illuminate her work include sections of psychoanalytic theory, especially Freudian.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. I try to avoid giving students a predisposition to Sexton, and instead discuss difficulties and questions as they arise in discussion.
2. (a) Examine the range of Sexton’s subject matter and poetic style.
   (b) Pick a theme in a Sexton poem and trace it in other poems she wrote.
   (c) In what sense is Sexton a religious poet? A heretic?
   (d) Examine several surprising, unconventional images from several Sexton poems. What makes them surprising? Successful?
   (e) If Sexton is confessional, what is it that she is confessing?
   (f) Select another poet with whom Sexton can be compared, such as a confessional poet, a feminist poet, a religious poet, and discuss similarities and differences in their perspectives.
   (g) What are some of the possible uses for poetry that speaks from the perspective of madness or of suicide?

Bibliography

Excellent articles on Sexton are most readily available in recent and forthcoming anthologies of criticism. Instructors can select articles that bear most directly on their concerns.


Critical Essays on Anne Sexton, edited by Linda Wagner-Martin,
New Communities,
New Identities, New Energies

Lorraine Vivian Hansberry (1930–1965)

Contributing Editor: Jeanne-Marie A. Miller

Classroom Issues and Strategies

The primary problem that might be encountered is the student’s lack of familiarity with black American drama. The images of blacks on the early American stage reflected their place in American life. Dramatic expression, exclusively by white authors, made of them contented, faithful slaves or servants, tragic figures of mixed blood, and comic characters. The comic figures were dominant.

Despite prejudice and racism, black playwrights were known in the American theater as early as 1823 when a play entitled King Shotaway, written by Mr. Brown (whose first name is uncertain) was produced by the African Grove Theater and Company. Also in the nineteenth century, William Wells Brown, a former slave, published The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom (1858), and William E. Easton’s play Dessalines was produced in Chicago (1893). From the beginning, the concern of most black playwrights has been the realistic depiction of the black experience.

During the twentieth century, growing out of the increased interest of American writers in folk material, came a renewed interest among white playwrights in blacks as source material for drama. Consider, for instance, Eugene O’Neill’s The Emperor Jones (1920). The 1920s, the period of the Harlem Renaissance, also introduced the first serious (that is, nonmusical) dramas by black playwrights on Broadway—for example, Willis Richardson’s A Chip Woman’s Fortune (1923) and Garland Anderson’sAppearances (1925).

One of the most popular plays on Broadway during the 1930s was
The Green Pastures (1930), a black folk fable written by Marc Connelly, a white playwright. As the Depression worsened, plays that protested against the social and economic conditions that sorely afflicted people were produced. Paul Peters and George Sklar’s Stevedore (1934), for example, centers on a black militant hero who defends his rights as a man and a worker on the New Orleans docks.

Though blacks were gaining some experience on Broadway, in community theaters, and in drama groups in black institutions of higher learning, it was the Federal Theater Project, which grew out of the Depression and provided work for unemployed theater people, that gave a major boost to blacks in theater. The post–World War II years found some white playwrights concentrating on the tense situation that existed when black soldiers, who had been in Europe fighting for democracy, returned to a segregated America. For instance, Strange Fruit (1945), a drama adapted from a novel by its author Lillian Smith and her sister Esther, makes a bitter commentary on racial segregation, intolerance, and injustice in this country.

Two dramas by black playwrights reached Broadway in the 1940s: white playwright Paul Green and Richard Wright’s Native Son (1941) and Theodore Ward’s Our Lan’ (1947). The play Native Son is a dramatization of Wright’s powerful novel about Bigger Thomas and the corrosive effects of American society on him. Our Lan’ concerns a group of newly freed slaves who search for economic independence and security during the latter days of the Civil War and the early Reconstruction period.

Ironically, as the heightened period of the civil rights movement of the 1950s produced a plethora of plays by black writers affected by the mood of the country, white playwrights who employed black themes and characters returned to the traditional images of blacks. Consider, for instance, Berenice Sadie Brown, a black cook, in Carson McCullers’s A Member of the Wedding (1950) and the black slave from Barbados who confesses to being a witch in Arthur Miller’s The Crucible (1953) (the setting is the Salem witchcraft trials in 1692).

During the 1950s, Off Broadway teemed with plays by black writers: William Branch’s Medal for Willie (1951) and In Splendid Error (1955); Alice Childress’s Trouble in Mind (1955) and Lofoten Mitchell’s Land Beyond the River (1957), for example. At the end of the decade, twenty-eight-year-old Lorraine Hansberry made her debut on Broadway with A Raisin in the Sun (1959). She was the first black woman to have a play produced on Broadway and the first black playwright and youngest playwright to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. The production was significant in other ways. Not only were the playwright and the cast, except for one, black, but so were the director and some of the investors. Blacks came out in large numbers to see this award-winning work that truthfully depicts a black working-class family who triumphs over the debilitating conditions of the ghetto. With Raisin American drama and blacks reached a new milestone. The play has been translated into over thirty languages and produced in many countries. In 1961 it became a film and in 1973 a Tony Award–winning musical.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

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Some of the major themes of her works are as follows: the slave system and its effect on Americans; the deprivation and injustice suffered by blacks because of racism; moral choices; deferred dreams of black Americans; self-determination of African countries; ability to control one’s own destiny; negative effects of voguish movements; and relationships between men and women. The major historical and personal issues that should be emphasized are slavery and the Civil War; contrasting portraits of slavery; the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, whose antecedents were in the black protest and revolt of slaves, and feminism.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Hansberry followed the trend of realism. In her dramas she wished to illustrate character. As an artist she believed that all people had stature and that there were no dramatically uninteresting people. She searched for the extraordinary, the uniqueness in the ordinary. She embraced the social nature of art, and she dissected personality as it interacted with society. Her dramatic style included the use of colloquial speech, a sense of the rhythm of language, the use of symbolism, and departures from realistic speech into the lyrical.

**Original Audience**

Hansberry wrote for the general theater audience.
Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

At the center of *The Member of the Wedding* (1950), a drama by Carson McCullers, a white writer, is a black cook who holds together the white family for whom she works. Unlike McCullers’s play, in which the black cook’s family is hardly ever seen, Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* dramatizes the story of a black domestic and *her* family. It is a story told from inside the race.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

Some study questions that students might find useful are as follows:

1. (a) What is Hansberry’s background?
   (b) What is her philosophy of art?
   (c) How does she move from the particular to the universal in her play?
   (d) How does she use language in her play?

Paper topics that have proved useful are as follows:

2. (a) The role of women in Hansberry’s play
   (b) Family relationships
   (c) Language in Hansberry’s play
   (d) Love between man and woman
   (e) Relationships between women and men

Bibliography

The introductions to *Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays of Lorraine Hansberry*, written by Julius Lester for the 1972 edition and by Margaret B. Wilkerson for the 1983 edition, as well as the critical backgrounds by Robert Nemiroff in each of these editions.

The collection of essays and the bibliography that appear in the special issue of *Freedomways* (vol. 19, no. 4, 1979) entitled “Lorraine Hansberry: Art of Thunder, Vision of Light.”


Edward Albee (b. 1928)
Classroom Issues and Strategies

One-act plays like The Sandbox work well in the classroom. Their brevity not only allows for detailed analysis of the text, but as dramatic works they invite the use of performance as a pedagogical strategy. Asking groups of students to prepare and put on their own productions of The Sandbox, whether live in the classroom or on videotape, transforms literary interpretation from an academic exercise to a pragmatic consideration of how to stage the play, as student actor/directors must make discussion about how lines are read, what body language is to be used, and even how to construct a set given the constraints of both Albee’s script directions and the limitations of the classroom. If several student groups put together their own versions of the play, the class can then discuss and write on the different approaches taken and what these approaches say about the way theater works and the variability of the interpretive act.

A performative approach can help students deal with the difficulties of The Sandbox. While the diction of the characters in the play is accessible, almost clichéd, the very poverty of their powers of expression can provoke questions about how we are supposed to understand the motivations and feelings of the characters. This contrast between the banality of the language of Mommy and Daddy and the extremity of their plans (murder) is, of course, one of the themes of the play itself, and in deciding how to portray the characters students will have to make decisions about just how to deliver their lines, decisions they can then describe and reflect on in written assignments. Similarly the meta-theatrical nature of the play, with Grandma’s and Mommy’s frequent references to the staging of the play itself and the identification of the Young Man as an actor (“playing” the Angel of Death), extends the theme of the poverty of interpersonal communication to the ritual of theater itself in modern, media-driven society (the Young Man is identified not just as an actor, but an actor from Southern California, with implications of the film industry).
Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968)

Contributing Editor: Keith D. Miller

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Context for “I Have a Dream”

Unfortunately, many students remain blissfully unaware of the horrific racial inequities that King decried in “I Have a Dream.” In 1963, southern states featured not only separate black and white schools, churches, and neighborhoods, but also separate black and white restrooms, drinking fountains, hotels, motels, restaurants, cafes, golf courses, libraries, elevators, and cemeteries. African Americans were also systematically denied the right to vote. In addition, southern whites could commit crimes against blacks—including murder—with little or no fear of punishment. The system of racial division was enshrined in southern custom and law. Racism also conditioned life in the North. Although segregationist practices directly violated the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments of the Constitution, the federal government exerted little or no effort to enforce these amendments. Leading politicians—including John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson—advocated racial equality only when pressured by King, James Farmer, John Lewis, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and other nonviolent activists who fostered social disruption in the pursuit of equal rights. Fortunately black students are often knowledgeable about the civil rights era.

Content for “I Have a Dream”

“I Have a Dream” has been misconstrued and sentimentalized by some who focus only on the dream. The first half of the speech does not portray an American dream but rather catalogs an American nightmare. In the manner of Old Testament prophets and Frederick Douglass, King excoriated a nation that espoused equality while forcing blacks onto “a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.”

Context for “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”

By the time of King’s final speech, the heyday of the civil rights movement was over. Large riots in major cities and the divisive issue of the Vietnam War had shattered the liberal consensus for civil rights and created an atmosphere of crisis.

Content for “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”

King sought to energize his listeners on behalf of the garbage workers’ strike. He analyzed the Parable of the Good Samaritan, identifying the Memphis strikers with the roadside victim and urging his listeners to act the
part of the Good Samaritan. He also arranged the strike in a historical sequence that features the Exodus, the cultural glory of Greece and Rome, the Reformation, the Emancipation Proclamation, the Great Depression, and—late in his address—the lunch counter sit-ins for civil rights and his major crusades in Albany, Birmingham, and Selma. By placing the struggle in Memphis in the company of epochal events and his own greatest achievements (neglecting to mention his more recent, unsuccessful campaign in Chicago), King elevated the strike from a local event to a significant act in the entire Western drama. Here he focused much more on economic inequity than he did in “I Have a Dream.”

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

African-American Folk Pulpit: “I Have a Dream”

Important in reaching King’s enormous and diverse audience were the resources of black folk preaching, including biblical quotations; call-and-response interaction with listeners; a calm-to-storm delivery that begins in a professorial manner before swinging gradually and rhythmically to a dramatic climax; schemes of parallelism, especially anaphora (e.g., “I have a dream that . . .”); and clusters of light and dark metaphors. African-American students can frequently inform their classmates about these time-honored characteristics of the African-American folk pulpit that animate King’s address.

African-American Folk Pulpit: “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”

Elements of the folk pulpit that enliven “Mountaintop” include the explication of a parable; call-and-response interaction; calm-to-storm delivery; the apocalyptic tone of much evangelistic, revivalist preaching (“The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land”); and the updating of a prominent analogy (or typology) of black Christians equating blacks with Old Testament Hebrews and slave-owners with the Egyptian Pharaoh. King labeled his opposition as Pharaoh and urged solidarity among Pharaoh’s oppressed and segregated slaves. Concluding “Mountaintop,” King boldly likened himself to Moses and foretold his own death prior to blacks’/Hebrews’ entry into the Promised Land.  
Familiar Symbolism: “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”

As with “I Have a Dream,” King defined his appeal by explaining nonviolence and by applying standard patriotic and religious symbols. His protest became an exercise of the First Amendment; an attempt to rebuild a New Memphis akin to a New Jerusalem; a later chapter in the book of Exodus; and in his last sentence, a merging of his vision with that of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

**Original Audience**

King spoke “I Have a Dream” to an immediate crowd of 250,000 followers.
who had rallied from around the nation in a March on Washington held in front of the Lincoln Memorial. His audience also consisted of millions across the nation and the world via radio and television.

King’s audience in “Mountaintop” consisted of 2,000 or so ardent and predominantly black followers gathered to support the cause of striking garbage workers in Memphis, Tennessee.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Old Testament prophets, Frederick Douglass’s “The Fourth of July” oration, John Lewis’s speech preceding “I Have a Dream,” and speeches by Malcolm X.

“I Have a Dream” harnesses the voices of Lincoln, Jefferson, Shakespeare, Amos, Isaiah, Jesus, Handel’s Messiah, “America the Beautiful,” a slave spiritual, and African-American preachers.


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James Cone, Martin and Malcolm and America, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991;
David Garrow, Bearing the Cross, New York: Morrow, 1986;

Playing records or audiovideo tapes of King’s speeches substantially facilitates discussion of the oral dynamics of the black pulpit that nurtured King and shaped his discourse. The PBS series “Eyes on the Prize” is especially useful.

Malcolm X (1925–1965)

Contributing Editor: Keith D. Miller

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Malcolm X is one of the most controversial figures one could study. Most Copyright © Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.
students, recognizing his enormous impact on recent American culture, will revel in discussions—or passionate debates—about his merits. Those who have read the popular *Autobiography of Malcolm X*—or seen the Spike Lee movie based on it—will argue that Malcolm X was foolish to be duped by Elijah Muhammad or brilliant to recognize that he had been duped; that Malcolm X reached a beautiful, universal vision at the end of his life or that he did not; that he was unforgivably sexist or that his sexism was typical of the period.

Students will invariably attempt to relate Malcolm X to issues in race relations, including those on their own campuses.

The first need is to direct the students, at the very least initially, to focus on “The Ballot or the Bullet” instead of jumping to an ultimate verdict on the *Autobiography*, on Malcolm X, or even on race relations in America.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

Malcolm X used the same major rhetorical strategy in “The Ballot or the Bullet” that he employed in other speeches and in the *Autobiography*. He attacked the well-established, sometimes unexamined tendency of African Americans to identify with white America, passionately insisting that blacks identify instead with Africans, their slave ancestors, and with each other. In that vein, he declares, “No, I’m not an American. I’m one of the twenty-two million black people who are victims of Americanism.” Speaking to American blacks, he explains, “You’re nothing but Africans. Nothing but Africans.”

The use of “X” as a replacement for a given last name is part of his rhetorical strategy. Malcolm X urged all African Americans to reject their last names, which were those of slave-owners, replacing them with “X” to stand for the lost African names of their ancestors. Thousands belonging to the Nation of Islam adopted this practice. Because the “X” substituted for last names, it defined members of the Nation as a single “family” of brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles. The use of “X” also bracketed the names of other African Americans, implicitly declaring that all of them were mistakenly identifying with whites, their slave masters.

The issue of violence loomed large in Malcolm X’s rhetoric. In this speech and elsewhere, he refused to repudiate violence, realizing that most of the white Americans who applauded Martin Luther King’s nonviolence would not react nonviolently themselves in the face of brutality. By refusing to embrace nonviolence, Malcolm X made King look more palatable than he would otherwise have appeared.

By the time of “The Ballot or the Bullet,” race dominated America’s domestic agenda. Millions watched police dogs tear into young African-American children protesting for integration in Birmingham. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson responded by proposing major civil rights legislation, which passed in the summer following “The Ballot or the Bullet.”

Though many believed that such an initiative signified racial progress, Malcolm X disagreed. Not only did conservative whites fail blacks, he maintained, so did “all these white liberals” who were supposedly allies. As he explains in this speech, many white liberals belonged to the
Democratic party, which was often dominated by southern segregationists. Unlike white liberals and the NAACP, Malcolm X did not want blacks to integrate white hotels. He wanted blacks to own the hotels.

Malcolm X’s own bleak childhood and criminal young adulthood helped shape his radical views and gave him insight into the lives of his primary audience—hundreds of thousands of African Americans trapped in the ghettos of America’s largest cities.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Malcolm X’s jeremiads owe something to the appeals of Marcus Garvey, an earlier leader who instilled racial pride, and to Malcolm X’s own father, a Garvey disciple. Even though Malcolm X advocated Islam instead of Christianity, his style and impact derive in part from the role of the black Protestant preacher—a revered patriarchal figure free to denounce from the pulpit whomever he saw fit.

**Original Audience**

Malcolm X delivered “The Ballot or the Bullet” to a predominantly African-American meeting in Cleveland of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which was shifting from nonviolent protest to Malcolm X–like black nationalism. Helping provoke this shift were speeches like this one, which was received enthusiastically.

Students can compare this talk to those that Malcolm X gave to largely white listeners. See, for example, the addresses collected in *Malcolm X Speaks at Harvard* (1991), edited by Archie Epps.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

Comparing the language of King and Malcolm X can be helpful. In some ways their analyses of the evils institutionalized in American life are quite similar. Though Malcolm X’s blowtorch denunciations are harsher than King’s, the main difference lies in King’s willingness to grant whites a way around the guilt that King so skillfully evoked. In King’s rhetorical world, whites—even ardent segregationists—could listen, change their ways, and learn to practice love and democracy. King claimed that his methods could actually win opponents over to his view.

During most of his career Malcolm X gave whites no such break. Instead he demanded separation from whites. He regarded integration not as a goal, but as a sentimental fiction. Toward the end of his life, he seemed more accepting of some whites, but his evolving vision was not entirely clear.

As James Cone explains, toward the end of their lives, King and Malcolm X were, in some ways, thinking alike. Both realized that, without economic muscle, masses of blacks would never prosper, not matter how
much this nation espoused the theory of integration. In “I’ve Been to the
Mountaintop,” King stressed the need for economic self-help and racial
solidarity. For both leaders, the divisions of economic class loomed as
important as—and were inseparable from—the issue of race. Most
Americans have never accepted this view.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

Who was Malcolm X’s primary audience? If it was primarily African
Americans, why did he address whites as well and the white news media?
Why did he (co)author a best-seller often read by and, in some ways, aimed
at whites? Why did he criticize whites in such an uncompromising fashion
instead of flattering his audience as speakers usually do? Why did he define
grounds of disagreement with whites instead of grounds of agreement, which
orators usually seek and are taught to seek? Why did he also often criticize
blacks who heard him—sometimes calling them “brainwashed”—and why
did they applaud him when he did so?

If Malcolm X was sincere in rejecting nonviolence, why did he
characteristically refuse to carry a gun and always, in fact, practice
nonviolence? If blacks were brutally oppressed, as he claimed, and if
retaliation was justified, as he claimed, why did he never lead such
retaliation? Since he gave fiery speeches but never organized either
nonviolent or violent protests against whites, was he sincere? Or was he a
“paper tiger”? Did he mean to be taken literally? If not, how did he mean to
be taken?

Bibliography

Millions continue to read the Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965), co-
authored by Alex Haley. I strongly recommend Remembering Malcolm
(1992) by Malcolm X’s assistant minister Benjamin Karim, who shows a
sensitive leader inside the Muslim mosque and reveals information available
nowhere else.

No thoroughly reliable, full-scale biography of Malcolm X exists.
Many details about his life (especially before his public career) remain
unknown. In Malcolm (1991), a detailed, provocative biography, Bruce
Perry claimed that the Autobiography features blatant exaggerations and
outright falsehoods. But some of Perry’s own claims seem unsupported.
Joe Wood compiled Malcolm X: In Our Own Image (1992), which contains
helpful essays by Cornel West, Arnold Rampersad, John Edgar Wideman,
Patricia Hill Collins, and others. In Martin and Malcolm and America
(1991), James Cone usefully compares and contrasts King and Malcolm X,
as do John Lucaites and Celeste Condit in “Reconstructing Equality:
Culturetypal and Counter-Cultural Rhetorics in the Martyred Black Vision.”
Classroom Issues and Strategies

Focus on specific parts of the story by asking a series of specific questions. This particular story can be approached on two different levels, for it is both a realistic depiction of a relief worker’s dedicated attempt to search for an unemployed, crippled black man in the slums of Depression Chicago in order to deliver a welfare check and a symbolic quest to discover the relationship between reality and appearances.

My approach to the story is generally conventional—asking questions and prompting class discussion on key issues. Another possible approach would be to play all or part of an excellent unabridged audio-recording of the story by Books on Tape, P.O. Box 7900, Newport Beach, CA 92658-7900, and discuss the interpretation that the Books-on-Tape reader gives to the story.

Students often respond actively to the following issues raised by “Looking for Mr. Green”:

1. Money as a formative influence on the creation of identity.
2. The problem of the noncompetitive in a highly competitive society.
3. The clash between idealism and cynical “realism,” between the noble idealist and the cynic.
4. The quest of a stubborn idealist in an irrational world.
5. Racism and stereotyping.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

*Historical Issues and Themes:* How does society help the downtrodden (in this story an unemployed crippled black man) in bad economic times (e.g., the Depression)? The story also examines the problems of race, class, and gender. Other issues that the class might focus upon are: the plight of the
noncompetitive in a capitalistic, highly competitive society; how money influences character; the alienation of the urban black man.

Personal Issues and Themes: How does an idealistic humanist (i.e., the typical Bellow hero) reconcile noble ideas with the harsh facts of the human condition? Is man essentially a victim of his situation or is he the master of his fate? What is Bellow suggesting about the problem of human suffering and evil? The relationship of the individual to his society? The relationship of appearance to reality? The clash between the human need to order and make sense of life according to moral principles and life’s amoral disorder, discontinuity, irrationality, and mystery?

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

The story can be discussed as a bildungsroman; as a parable, as a symbolic quest; as a realistic depiction of the Depression and of the alienation of the urban black man.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

The story might be compared with some works by such black writers as James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison, or any other writers who have written about the Depression (e.g., John Steinbeck). The story could be compared to some stories by such naturalistic writers as Theodore Dreiser and Jack London who are also concerned with the free will versus determinism theme. An interesting comparison would be with F. Scott Fitzgerald, who wrote on the formative influence of money on the self. The idea that illusion is necessary for the survival of self in a harsh, predatory world is a central theme of modern American drama (Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller), and this story might be compared to the most important modern American plays. Bellow’s depiction of women might be compared to that of other writers.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing
1. (a) What is the purpose in the story of Grebe’s supervisor Raynor? What is Bellow’s attitude toward Raynor’s cynical “wisdom”? Is concern for the individual anachronistic? For philosophical studies?
(b) What is the purpose of the encounter with the Italian grocer who presents a hellish vision of the city with its chaotic masses of suffering humanity?
(c) The old man Field offers this view of money—“Nothing is black where it shines and the only place you see black is where it ain’t shining.” Discuss. What do you think of the scheme for creating black millionaires? Why does Bellow include this scheme in the story?
(d) What is the purpose of the Staika incident in the story? Raynor sees her as embodying “the destructive force” that will “submerge everybody in time,” including “nations and governments.” In contrast, Grebe sees her as “the life force.” Who is closer to the truth?
(e) The word “sun” and sun imagery are repeated throughout the story. Discuss.

2. (a) Discuss the theme of appearance versus reality.
(b) Bellow ends the story with Grebe’s encounter with the drunken, naked black woman, who may be another embodiment of the spirit of Staika. Why does Bellow conclude the story this way? Has Grebe failed or succeeded? Is he deceiving himself?
(c) David Demarest comments: “Grebe’s stubborn idealism is nothing less than the basic human need to construct the world according to intelligent, moral principles.” Discuss.
(d) Believing that “Looking for Mr. Green” needs to be seen “as one of the great short stories of our time,” Eusebio Rodrigues argues that the Old Testament flavors it. This story is “a modern dramatization of Ecclesiastes.” Discuss.

Bibliography

Chavkin, Allan. “The Problem of Suffering in the Fiction of Saul Bellow.” Comparative Literature Studies 21 (Summer 1984): 161–74. Provides an overview of Bellow’s work and analyzes key influences on the
fiction.


**Web Sites**

http://english.byu.edu/cronin/saulb/journal.html
Bernard Malamud (1914–1986)

Contributing Editor: Evelyn Avery

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Jewish in style and character types, Bernard Malamud’s fiction appeals to a broad range of students who appreciate the author’s warmth, ironic humor, and memorable characters. Above all, they find his blend of the universal and the particular appealing and unique.

A writer who uses fantasy and history, who creates tragic and comic characters, who can write realistically and metaphorically, Malamud will challenge and delight students of varied backgrounds. Occasionally, “Yiddish” expressions or Jewish ritual will have to be explained, but, for the most part, meaning will be derived from context.

Since the effects of suffering are central to Malamud’s fiction, students should learn that his Jews symbolize all victims and that his characters cannot be easily categorized as heroes or villains.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Writing in the last third of the twentieth century, Malamud was aware of social problems: rootlessness, infidelity, abuse, divorce, and more, but he believes in love as redemptive and sacrifice as uplifting. Often, success depends on cooperation between antagonists. In “The Magic Barrel,” the matchmaker worries about his “fallen” daughter, while the daughter and the rabbinic student are drawn together by their need for love and salvation.

If Malamud’s readers are sometimes disappointed by ambiguous or unhappy endings, they are often reassured about the existence of decency in a corrupt world. Malamud’s guarded optimism reflects several influences. He cites American authors, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James, as guides to moral and spiritual struggles. Like them, Malamud
holds individuals responsible for their behavior. He also admires Russian writers, Fyodor Dostoyevski and Anton Chekhov, for their vibrant portrayal of the self versus society. Although he does not mention other Jewish writers as influences, he concedes “a common fund of Jewish experience and possibly an interest in the ethical approach.”

In interviews, Malamud credits his hardworking “Yiddish” parents and their Eastern European immigrant generation with providing models of morality, but he emphasizes that humanity is his subject, and that he uses Jews to communicate the universal just as William Faulkner created a universe from a corner of the American South.

Despite his universality or perhaps because of it, Malamud resembles a number of American Jewish authors, including earlier twentieth-century writers, such as Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, and Henry Roth, as well as post–World War II authors such as Isaac Bashevis Singer, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth. Because Jewish fiction can reflect life’s uncertainties and absurdities, it has broad appeal to contemporary readers, who applaud the attempt of ordinary people to determine their fate. Such themes, however, are evident in the non-Jewish literature that Malamud recognized when he described himself, in a 1975 interview, as “an American . . . a Jew, and . . . a writer for all men.”

His universality, however, is rooted in distinctive character types, settings, and details. Thus, the “schlemiel,” a common type in Eastern European Yiddish literature, appears in some American Jewish fiction. Although at times a victim of back luck, the “schlemiel” compounds his problems by choosing wrongly. Yakov Bok (in The Fixer), fleeing his Jewish identity, Morris Bober (in The Assistant), attempting to burn his store down, and Leo Finkle (in “The Magic Barrel”), insisting that his future wife be young and beautiful, learn to revise their values, reject assimilation, materialism, and conformity, and embrace sacrifice and spirituality. Trapped in depressing, even dangerous settings, in cramped, deteriorating stores, suffocating apartments, condemned buildings, in a nation, Russia, where Jews are at risk everywhere. Malamud’s characters are both archetypal Jews and suffering humanity. Malamud’s awareness of Jewish pain is best portrayed in The Fixer, a novel of extreme anti-Semitism in Tzarist Russia, which for many critics evokes the Holocaust.

Although a serious writer, Malamud uses humor to
underscore the preposterous, to highlight grief, and to instruct readers. Thus Frank Alpine (in *The Assistant*) tumbles into the grocer’s grave, Seymour Levin (in *A New Life*) lectures with his pants unzipped, and Yakov Bok (in *The Fixer*) rescues an anti-Semite whose gratitude will later lead to Bok’s persecution. If Malamud’s fiction produces sorrow, it also provokes laughter, albeit nervous laughter.

**Original Audience**

A best-selling, critically acclaimed author, Bernard Malamud, like Isaac Bashevis Singer and Philip Roth, earned success with the publication of his early Jewish works, *The Magic Barrel* (a collection of short stories) and *The Assistant* in the late 1950s. Although the American Jewish literary renaissance peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, writers like Malamud continue to be read and enjoyed. In fact his reputation is steadily growing as students are introduced to his works. Moreover, the general interest in ethnicity draws readers to Jewish literature, where they discover that Bellow, Malamud, Ozick, and Singer, to name a few, speak to all sensitive, intelligent readers.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

As indicated earlier, Malamud’s fiction may be compared and contrasted with works by certain European, American, and Jewish authors. Like Fyodor Dostoyevski’s characters, Malamud’s protagonists are tormented, guilt-ridden, and paranoiac. Their suffering recalls *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from the Underground* as well as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s and Henry James’s psychological tales. While Malamud has been identified as an American Jewish writer, his work can be differentiated from Saul Bellow’s (considered more cerebral) and from Philip Roth’s (judged more satiric). Perhaps the best of his old world stories resemble those of Isaac Bashevis Singer, whose work attempts to reconcile the old world and the new.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

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1. A variety of questions can be posed about Malamud’s fiction. Is Malamud, for example, a Jewish writer or a writer who happens to be Jewish? Since “The Magic Barrel” includes a rabbinic student and a matchmaker, how universal is the story? Does the story have a happy ending? What happens? Is this tale representative of the author’s works?

2. More ambitious assignments can analyze literary influences on Malamud, his style in comparison to other Jewish writers, or male-female relationships; or possibly an imaginative option such as rewriting the story’s conclusion.

**Bibliography**

Since Malamud’s death in 1986, his reputation continues to grow. With the establishment of the Bernard Malamud Society and the publication of a newsletter, Malamudian scholars are kept apprised of research and conferences. For further information contact Dr. Evelyn Avery at Towson State University, Towson, Maryland, 21204; or Dr. Lawrence Lasher, English Department, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Baltimore, Maryland, 21228.
Classroom Issues and Strategies

The challenge in teaching “The Expensive Moment” lies in the fact that many conservative students define family values in direct contrast with the middle-aged Faith Asbury. Her character is a redefinition of that term; she is a secular humanist who is unabashedly sexual, and who has a relationship with her children that encourages them to argue, confront, and engage with her, a single parent, as an equal. Furthermore, younger students not only unfamiliar with this story’s context—the aftermath of the Chinese Cultural Revolution—but ignorant about our government’s confrontations with its youth in the 1960s and 1970s, may find it difficult to understand why Faith mourns Rachel, her friend’s daughter who went underground as a result of an “expensive moment” of choice to bomb military plants and prisons housing radical activists like Rachel herself.

I would therefore (1) encourage discussion and journal writing about the delicate balance that single mothers face maintaining their own personhood amidst political and personal biases that marginalize them; (2) expose students to other Paley stories told from Faith Asbury’s first-person point of view (for example, “A Conversation With My Father,” “Friends,” “Ruthie and Edie”), that depict this eponymous maternal narrator in her youth and middle age as receptive to change, yet consistent in advocating a green and sane world where children can live out their lives; (3) invite guest speakers familiar with the cultural context of the 1960s and 1970s; and (4) show political documentaries questioning establishment values, for example, “Letters from Vietnam,” footage about the Kent State disaster juxtaposed with the Tiananmen Square massacre. As sophisticated media users, students will be better able to see the interrelatedness of national/international generational conflict.
Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Paley’s is a multicultural perspective, historically aware of the great waves of immigration that peopled the vibrant New York neighborhoods she evokes so well. Woven into the texture of her fiction are the problems of grassroots working-class mothers who as urban, leftist Jews link playground politics with global conflict. Moreover, Paley is always aware that female sexuality is a source of literary creativity but never separates the craft of literature from the personal and political contexts in which gender conflicts arise.

Overarching is Paley’s womanism, maternal and comradely rather than self-reflexive. It is that womanism that, despite the difference in their cultural backgrounds, links Faith with Xie Feng, newly arrived from mainland China to visit New York’s teeming Vesey Street. Of an age, both women understand patriarchy, history, and the need to fight for a future to endure their loss of lovers, husbands, and especially, beloved children.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Paley uses a stylistic collage—fragments and ellipses, a merging of past and present tense—that conveys a sense of wholeness in which setting, character, and point of view coalesce and render with absolute fidelity a small urban world. Tonal irony as well as a near-perfect ear for dialogue make Paley a writer’s writer.

Structurally, Paley’s stories resemble women’s diary writing—fragmented, fact-focused, immersed in the transitory, seemingly disconnected aspects of daily life that define women’s lives.

Original Audience

Paley’s reading audience for her earlier stories about growing up as a second-generation immigrant child (“The Loudest Voice,” for example) was cosmopolitan, college-educated, and attuned to literary experimentation. Because the audience was
Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Some thematic comparison and contrast can be made with Tillie Olsen, whose ethnic and politically activist background is similar to Paley’s. Olsen’s “I Stand Here Ironing” and Tell Me a Riddle involve class and intergenerational conflicts; in fact, in Olsen’s novella, feisty, elderly Jews, like Paley’s parents, hold on to the secular humanism that they brought with them to America. But Olsen uses women’s sexuality more sparingly, making it a problem of gender, rather than physical urgency for women. Furthermore, Olsen’s lush, elegiac style differs from Paley’s deft use of irony, humor, economy, earthiness. Another writer reminiscent of Paley in her depiction of the parent-child conflict and women-bonding in a fluid and changing world is Amy Tan, whose novel The Joy Luck Club has bits of dialogue and irony similar to Paley's, though Tan’s humor is more life-affirming.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. (a) Keep a journal focusing on the importance of place in your life. To what extent does place influence identity?
   (b) Write a first-person narrative focusing on your memory of exploring an experience or discovering an idea markedly different from those of your parents.

2. Compare the neighborhood settings in two other Grace Paley stories, “An Interest in Life” and “The Long-Distance Runner.” Discuss the way settings in these stories make the first-person narrator feel integrated or marginal in her community.

3. Keep a collection of tapes or photograph albums focusing on intergenerational ties as well as conflicts.

Bibliography

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Cynthia Ozick (b. 1928)

*Contributing Editor: Tresa Grauer*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

This is a hard story to read and some students may be reluctant to “analyze” it if their first response is emotional. At the same time, others may not have the background to understand the story’s events. Students need to understand that the historical context of “The Shawl” is the systematic destruction of European Jewry during the Second World War. They may ask: What do we mean when we talk about the Holocaust? When was it? What happened? Those students with some historical knowledge may find sharing the knowledge with the others to be one way to begin talking about “The Shawl.” You might also ask them to point out the clues within the story that helped them to know where they were. Consider, for example, “the march,” or “the roll-call arena,” or the “ash-stippled wind.”

You may find that some students will want to universalize the experience of Jews during the Holocaust—to see it as one among many different kinds of human tragedies—in order to discuss it in terms that they are familiar with and can better understand. And/or they may want to argue that the experience was completely unique and thus cannot happen again. You might consider talking about what’s at stake for them in these arguments. For example, is it less frightening if we say that the Holocaust was unique? If we can contain it within our imagination, does it make it less horrible or horrifying? It’s difficult to talk about why or how the Holocaust “happened,” and students will realize that the issues that come up around trying to make sense of it are those that historians and fiction writers are confronting as well.
Students often want to judge Stella for taking Magda’s shawl. While it’s important to talk about why she might have done this, it’s also important to realize that the story points insistently—thematically and stylistically—to the fact that we cannot make moral judgments about behavior in the camps. The standards of the outside world simply do not apply.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

One of the most important things to keep in mind about “The Shawl” is Ozick’s fear of making art out of the Holocaust—of using aesthetics to make something beautiful, or pleasurable, out of something that should only be viewed with horror. In other words, she believes that there are limitations to what can inspire art and to what can become art. These concerns are central to any discussion of Holocaust fiction, as artists and critics try to balance the potential dangers of artistic expression with the valuable insights that they can also provide. Ozick says that she accepts Theodor Adorno’s famous dictum, “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” in theory; nevertheless, she “cannot not write about it.” In Berel Lang’s collection, Writing and the Holocaust, she explains, “It rises up and claims my furies. All the same, I believe that the duty of our generation, so close to the events themselves, is to absorb the data, to learn what happened. I am not in favor of making fiction of the data, or of mythologizing or poeticizing it. If we each had a hundred lifetimes, there would not be enough time to assimilate the documents. I constantly violate this tenet; my brother’s blood cries out from the ground, and I am drawn, and driven” (284).

“The Shawl” also makes clear that speech itself is dangerous: despite Rosa’s desire to hear her child’s voice, Magda is safe only as long as she is mute. The consequence of her cry—the only dialogue in the story—is death. In discussion, you might also consider other situations in which it is dangerous (but necessary? inevitable?) to speak out.

Historical texts and fiction about the Holocaust tend not to focus on the specific experiences of women, despite the fact that men and women were generally separated in the camps. As Carol Rittner and John Roth make clear in Different Voices, the experiences of men and women—and their interpretations

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of those experiences—were often much the same; however, they also faced dangers that were particular to their gender. By raising the question of Magda’s paternity, “The Shawl” introduces the issue of rape—and subsequent pregnancy—as a particular danger that women faced. (It also forces us to ask whether “blood” makes any difference in determining who is a Jew.) The fact that the protagonists in “The Shawl” are female make this story unusual among stories about the Holocaust; however, Ozick has always refused to see her work as particularizing. Does gender affect your students’ reading of “The Shawl”?

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Ozick’s use of language demonstrates that all expectations must be subverted in writing and thinking about the unnatural world of a death camp. For example, she uses a series of paradoxical images that combine the fantastical and the realistic: here, a baby’s first tooth is an “elfin tombstone”; a breast is a “dead volcano”; a starved belly is “fat, full and round”; and a shawl can be “magic,” sheltering and nourishing a child as an extension of the mother’s body. Ozick’s prose is also extraordinarily compressed, giving the impression that there is much that is left unsaid, and the narrative voice is simultaneously appalled and oddly dispassionate. Her minimalism manages to convey her ambivalence about using metaphoric language to represent an experience that is nearly unimaginable.

**Original Audience**

“The Shawl” was originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1980. Since then, it has been reprinted together with the novella “Rosa” (in *The Shawl*, 1988) and anthologized many times.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

Ozick wrote this story together with a longer novella, “Rosa,”
although “Rosa” was not published until three years later in _The New Yorker_. They are now published together in a single volume, and it may be useful to consider these two stories as part of a whole. Together, they provide different but complimentary ways to write about the Holocaust, considering the subject both directly and indirectly.

Students may be familiar with Art Spiegelman’s _Maus_, which uses graphic art to approach the subject of the Holocaust. How does form function in depicting the Holocaust?

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

Although there are many questions incorporated into the above discussion, you might also consider the following:

1. What does it mean for speech to be dangerous?
2. Discuss the image of the shawl (e.g., shawl as child, shawl as source of nourishment, shawl as that which mutes).

**Bibliography**

Texts listed in the headnote are the best places to begin reading about Ozick.

**General History of the Holocaust:**


**Holocaust Literature and Representation:**


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Women and the Holocaust:


Adrienne Rich (b. 1929)

*Contributing Editor: Wendy Martin*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

Rich’s poetry is extremely accessible and readable. However, there are a few allusions that cannot be understood and, from time to time, there will be references to events or literary works that will not be immediately recognized by students. This material or these references are glossed in the text so the student can understand the historical or literary context.

Other problems occur when there is fundamental hostility to the poet over feminism. The instructor will have to explain that feminism simply means a belief in the social, political, and economic equality of women and men. Explain, also, that Rich is not a man-hater or in any way unwilling to consider men as human beings. Rather, her priority is to establish the fundamental concerns of her women readers.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

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It is important to read these poems out loud, to understand that Rich is simultaneously a political, polemical, and lyric poet. It is important also to establish for the poems of the '60s, the Vietnam War protests as background as well as the feminist movement of the '60s and '70s.

It is also important to emphasize that in many respects the '60s and '70s were reaction to the confinement of the '50s and the feminine mystique of that period. In addition, stress that the political background of the poems by Adrienne Rich connects the personal and the political.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Rich employs free verse, dialogue, and the interweaving of several voices. She evolves from a more tightly constructed traditional rhymed poetry to a more open, loose, and flexible poetic line. The instructor must stress again that poetic subjects are chosen often for their political value and importance. It is important once again to stress that politics and art are intertwined, that they cannot be separated. Aesthetic matters affect the conditions of everyday life.

**Original Audience**

Adrienne Rich has written her poetry for all time. While it grows out of the political conflicts and tensions of the feminist movement and the antiwar protests of the sixties and seventies, it speaks of universal issues of relationships between men and women and between women and women that will endure for generations to come.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

The feminist activist poets like Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Carolyn Forché would be very useful to read along with Rich. Also, it might be useful to teach poets like Allen Ginsberg and
Gary Snyder, who were, after all, poets of the beat movement of the late ’50s and early ’60s. They were poets with a vision, as is Rich.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

1. It might be useful to discuss the evolution of the more free and more flexible line that begins with Walt Whitman and the greater flexibility of subject matter that also begins with Whitman and Emily Dickinson and to carry this discussion on through William Carlos Williams and Allen Ginsberg to discuss the evolution of the free verse that Rich uses.

2. Any writing topic that would discuss either the evolution of flexible poetics or aesthetics—that is, a concern with people’s actual lived experiences, for the way they actually talk and think.

   In addition, in the case of Rich, any paper that would link her to other women writers of the twentieth century (and the nineteenth, for that matter) would be useful. Rich is often quoted as an important cultural critic who provides the context for feminist thought in general in the twentieth century. It might also be useful to assign parts of her prose, either in collected essays or in *Of Woman Born*.

**Bibliography**

I would highly recommend my own book: *An American Triptych: The Lives and Work of Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, and Adrienne Rich*. I am recommending this book because it provides both a historical and an aesthetic context for the poetry of Rich. It links her to earlier traditions that have shaped her work and demonstrates effectively how American Puritanism and American feminism are intertwined. It gives a lot of biographical material as well as historical background and literary analysis.

Hisaye Yamamoto (b. 1921)

*Contributing Editor: King Kok Cheung*

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Classroom Issues and Strategies

It is useful to spend some time introducing Japanese American history and culture, especially the practice of “picture bride” (which sheds light on the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Hayashi) and the style of communication among Issei and Nisei.

It would be helpful to analyze “Seventeen Syllables” in terms of a double plot: the overt one concerning Rosie and the covert one concerning Mrs. Hayashi. Students often relate to the interaction between mother and daughter and are appalled by Mr. Hayashi’s callousness.

Instructors may also consider showing Hot Summer Winds, a film written and directed by Emiko Omori, and based on Yamamoto’s “Seventeen Syllables” and “Yoneko’s Earthquake.” It was first broadcast in May 1991 as part of PBS’s American Playhouse series.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

1. The relatively restrained interaction between Issei (first generation) and Nisei (second generation) as a result of both cultural prescription and language barrier;
2. The historical practice of “picture bride,” according to which the bride and the groom had only seen each other’s photos before marriage;
3. The theme of aborted creativity; and
4. The sexual and racial barriers faced by the author herself, who came of age in an internment camp during World War II

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Stress the narrative strategies of the author, especially her use of naïve narrator. While Yamamoto may have been influenced by the modernist experimentation with limited point of view, she also capitalizes on the scant verbal interchange between her Japanese-American characters to build suspense and
tension.

Original Audience

The work has always been intended for a multicultural audience, but the reader’s appreciation will undoubtedly be enhanced by knowledge of Japanese-American history and culture.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

1. James Joyce (Dubliners) for the use of naive narrator;
2. Grace Paley for the interaction between husbands and wives, between immigrant parents and their children;
3. Wakako Yamauchi for the relationship between mothers and daughters

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. (a) How do cultural differences complicate intergenerational communication in “Seventeen Syllables”?
   (b) Are there any connections between the episodes about Rosie and those about her mother?
   (c) What effects does the author achieve by using a limited point of view?
2. (a) How does Yamamoto connect the two plots concerning Rosie and her mother in “Seventeen Syllables”?
   (b) Analyze the theme of deception in “Seventeen Syllables.”
   (c) Compare the use of the daughter’s point of view in Hisaye Yamamoto’s “Seventeen Syllables” and Grace Paley’s “The Loudest Voice.”
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Lawson Inada (b. 1938)

Teaching material for Lawson Inada is available on The Heath Anthology web site. (To access the site, please go to the Houghton Mifflin college home page at http://college.hmco.com. Select English, then select The Heath Anthology textbook site.)

James Merrill (1926–1995)

Teaching material for James Merrill is available on The Heath Anthology web site. (To access the site, please go to the Houghton Mifflin college home page at http://college.hmco.com. Select English, then select The Heath Anthology textbook site.)

John Ashbery (b. 1927)

Contributing Editor: David Bergman

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students should be encouraged to explore the connections between seemingly unrelated passages. These connections are
probably best found if the student is encouraged to move freely through the poem at first, finding whatever connection he or she can spot. Richard Howard convincingly argues that each Ashbery poem contains an emblem for its entire meaning. If allowed time, students usually find such emblems. Second, drawing connections between Ashbery’s method and such graphic methods as collage and assemblage often helps. Students, of course, should be reminded to read the notes.

I have found it useful to present Ashbery in relation to the visual arts, in particular the shifting perspective of comic strips, the surprising juxtapositions of collage and assemblage, the vitality of abstract impressionism, and the metaphysical imagery of de Chirico.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

The selection highlights three major themes or questions running through Ashbery’s work: (1) the problem of subjective identity—Whose consciousness informs the poem? (2) the relationship between language and subjectivity—Whose language do I speak or does the language have a mind of its own? (3) the connection between subjectivity, language, and place—What does it mean to be an American poet?

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Ashbery has long been interested in French art, especially dada and surrealism. Such interests have merged with an equally strong concern for poetic form and structure, as evinced by the sestina of “Farm Implements” and the 4 x 4 structure (four stanzas each of four lines) of “Paradoxes and Oxymorons,” a structure he uses through *Shadow Train*, the volume from which the poem was taken. Ashbery’s combination of surrealism and formalism typifies a certain strain of postmodernism.
Original Audience

Obviously Ashbery is writing for a highly sophisticated contemporary audience. The decade he spent in France provided him with an international perspective.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Frank O’Hara, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler are or were close friends of Ashbery; together they formed the nucleus of what is sometimes dubbed the New York School of Poetry. The dreamlike imagery bears some resemblance to John Berryman and Allen Ginsberg. Walt Whitman provides a particularly vital touchstone to an American tradition.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

How do comic strips (and other forms of popular art) inform both the content and style of Ashbery’s poems? Who is speaking in an Ashbery poem? What is American about John Ashbery?

Bibliography


Pedro Pietri (b. 1944)

Classroom Issues and Strategies

As with other Nuyorican poets, the language switching and references to either Spanish or Puerto Rican culture need to be explained. Preparing a handout with a glossary and giving a small introduction to life in El Barrio (perhaps with photos, pictures, or videos) might also be helpful.

Pedro Pietri has produced two records, “Loose Joints” and “One is a Crowd” (Folkway Records). If available, they would be good for classroom use.

Some students might have a difficult time understanding the anger and the bitterness of Pietri’s voice against “the system,” an issue for disagreement and discussion.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Pietri’s poetry is political poetry in its most direct sense: a poetry of denunciation, directed to create a cultural consciousness among the members of the Puerto Rican community. Other themes are the demythification of authority figures and social institutions (government, schools, church, “the system”); alienation in contemporary urban life; a surrealistc search for the truth in the irrational and the absurd. In addition, the political status and the poverty levels for Puerto Ricans in New York can be discussed in light of Pietri’s denunciation of “the system.” How do students feel about the welfare system and about the Hispanic poor in this country? About the First World/Third World dichotomies within the United States?

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

“Puerto Rican Obituary” can be read as a parody of an epic
poem (the dream and the search and the epic deeds of a nation inverted), and within an antiaesthetic attitude. Again, as in Laviera, this is oral poetry to be recited and screamed. In Traffic Violations, Pietri’s poetry falls within the surrealistic mode, fragmented images, search for the absurd in everyday life, irrational, surprising metaphors, and imagery, humor, and sarcasm.

Original Audience

Though quite contemporary, Pietri’s poetry has to be understood in terms of its original objective of addressing the masses as oral poetry. This is important in order to achieve a true understanding of his use of popular language, anger, and antiaesthetic style.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

I believe that fruitful comparisons may be drawn if one looks into Allen Ginsberg and other poets of the beat generation and of the ‘60s (as poetry of social denouncement, protest, and harsh antiacademic language). Also compare with contemporary African-American poets who deal with urban themes, alienation, and social injustice.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. For “Puerto Rican Obituary,” questions dealing with theme: What is it denouncing? How are the “puertorriqueños” portrayed? Analyze image of death. Would you define it as an “epic” poem? What is the use of Spanish in the poem? Consider the poem as an example of urban literature; define the utopian space that Pietri proposes.
2. Paper topics might deal with Puerto Rican migration; use of Spanish and English (for aesthetic effect); functions of humor and irony; analyze the poems as
“outlaw” literature.

Bibliography

Two general articles on Puerto Rican writers discuss Pietri’s work:


Rudolfo A. Anaya (b. 1937)

Contributing Editor: Raymund Paredes

Classroom Issues and Strategies

_Bless Me, Ultima_ is a *bildungsroman* and can be compared usefully to other works of this type, notably James Joyce’s _A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man_. Another important quality of _Bless Me, Ultima_ is its heavy reliance on Mexican folklore, particularly such well-known legends as “La Llorona.” There are many collections of Mexican and Mexican-American folklore that would give students a sense of the traditions that influence Anaya’s novel. I recommend, for example, Americo Paredes’s _Folktales of Mexico_ (which has a very useful introduction) and _Mexican-American Folklore_ by James O. West. Another important issue to consider is how Anaya tries to impart a flavor of Mexican-American culture to his work. In the excerpt from _Bless Me, Ultima_, Anaya uses Mexican names, Spanish words and phrases, and focuses on one of the strongest institutions of Mexican-American life, the Catholic church. If it is true that much of American culture and literature grow out of Protestantism, it would be worth examining how those parts of American culture that are based in Catholicism are distinctive.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

The protagonist of _Bless Me, Ultima_ is Antonio, who is coming of age at the conclusion of World War II. Participation in the war has clearly had a dramatic impact on Antonio’s older brothers, who now regard the rather isolated life of central New Mexico as dull and confining. Clearly, Antonio’s community is in a state of transition and its citizens must face the inevitability of greater interaction with the world beyond their valley. Not far from Antonio’s community, at White Sands, the atomic bomb is being tested. Anaya uses the bomb not only to represent the unprecedented capacity of the human
race to annihilate itself but to symbolize the irresistible encroachment of modern technology not only in rural New Mexico but everywhere.

Perhaps the major question that Anaya confronts is how Mexican Americans can retain certain key traditional values while accepting the inevitability—and desirability—of change. In dealing with this issue, Anaya places the boy Antonio under the tutelage of the wise curandera (folkhealer), Ultima, who prepares her charge for the future by grounding him in the rich Spanish and Indian cultures of his past. For Ultima, tradition is not confining but liberating.

One of the striking characteristics of *Bless Me, Ultima* is its critical stance toward Catholicism, which is presented here as rigid, intimidating, and, at least to Antonio and his friends, largely unintelligible. The Catholic God is punishing while Antonio and his friends long for a nurturing deity. In attacking certain aspects of Catholicism, Anaya follows a long line of Latin American, Mexican, and Chicano writers including José Antonio Villarreal and Tomás Rivera.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

*Bless Me, Ultima* is a fairly conventional novel structurally, although Anaya does use such devices as stream of consciousness, flashbacks, and shifting narrators. As noted above, the key formal and stylistic question is how Anaya attempts to present his novel as a distinctly Chicano work of fiction. Again, Anaya employs Spanish words and names (a boy called Florence, for example, from the Spanish “Florencio”) and focuses on important cultural events in Chicano experience. But for the most part, in terms of formal qualities and structure, *Bless Me, Ultima* is very much a contemporary American novel.

**Original Audience**

*Bless Me, Ultima* is a work that intends to explain and depict Mexican-American culture in New Mexico for a general American audience. Nevertheless, Anaya’s presentation of Mexican-American culture is relatively “thick” so as to appeal to Chicano readers as well.

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Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

*Bless Me, Ultima* has clearly been influenced by Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Another interesting juxtaposition is with *Native Son*, Richard Wright’s account of a young man—older than Antonio—who comes of age without much of a sense of his past and with few prospects in the harsh, urban environment of Chicago. Anaya’s presentation of the Catholic Church can be fruitfully compared to that of José Antonio Villarreal in *Pocho*; Anaya’s focus on Mexican-American childhood is complemented nicely by Tomás Rivera’s . . . *y no sé lo tragó la tierra* and Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*. 
Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. The excerpt from *Bless Me, Ultima* focuses on events surrounding Lent. Students can be asked to write about their experiences of this occasion or other important religious events. Comparing different sorts of religious experiences could be very useful.

2. As Anaya presents Catholicism, the Church emphasizes punishment and damnation rather than forgiveness and salvation. What is the effect on Antonio and his friends? How do they respond to church practices and rituals? Do students have any ideas about how religion might be presented to children more positively and successfully?

3. Have the students consider the *bildungsroman* as a literary form. Why is it so enduring? How would the students write one of their own lives? What would be the central experiences they would focus on?

Richard Rodriguez (b. 1944)

Teaching material for Richard Rodriguez is available on *The Heath Anthology* web site. (To access the site, please go to the Houghton Mifflin college home page at http://college.hmco.com. Select *English*, then select *The Heath Anthology* textbook site.)

Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) (b. 1934)

*Contributing Editor: Marcellette Williams*

Classroom Issues and Strategies

The typical problems in teaching Baraka’s poetry have to do with what has been called his “unevenness”—perhaps more accurately attributable to the tension inherent in balancing
Baraka’s role as poet and his role as activist—and the strident tone of some of his poems—also related to his political activism.

Both problems are probably best addressed directly by inviting the students to describe or characterize their impressions of the impetus for the poems as they read them (stressing “their reading” is critical and complements what current reading theory regards as the essential role of the reader in any reading paradigm), then asking them to substantiate textually those impressions. Such a strategy fineses the temptation to engage in a definitive debate of the politics of the time as the genesis and raison d’être of Baraka’s poetry. Further, such a strategy allows students to explore the aesthetics as well as the politics of his poetry and understand better the inter/inner-(con)textuality of the two.

Because the “sound” of Baraka’s poetry is essential to texturing or fleshing out its meaning, readings aloud should contribute to discussions as well as to the introduction to his work.

Students respond almost always to the intimacy of Baraka’s poems; sometimes they are offended by that intimacy, and this posture often leads to discussions of poetic necessity. Students also raise the question of the paradox of Baraka’s clear aesthetic debts and his vehemence in trying to tear down that very Western ideal.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

It is important to emphasize the themes of death and despair in the early poems, moral and social corruption with its concomitant decrying of Western values and ethics, the struggle against self-hatred, a growing ethnic awareness, and the beneficent view of and creative energy occasioned by “black magic.”

The issues to focus on historically involve the racial tenor of the decades represented by his poetic output as well as the poetic aesthetics of imagism, projectivism, and Dadaism—all of which influenced Baraka to some extent.

From the perspective of personal issues, his bohemian acquaintances of the fifties (Charles Olson and Allen Ginsberg, for example), his marriage to Hettie Cohen, his visit...
Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

It is appropriate to refer to the question of “school,” here again in the context of the poet’s use of sound and images as the articulation of form and meaning. I would further encourage the students to pay careful attention to Baraka’s use of repetition—at the lexical, syntactic, semantic, and phonological levels. What is its effect? Does it inform? If so, how? Are there aspects of the poems one might regard as transformations? If so, what might they be? What effect might they have? How might they function in the poem?

Baraka’s consideration of the significance of “roots” appears to evolve in his poetry. How might you characterize it?
Original Audience

A consideration of progenitors and progeny provides a convenient point of departure for a discussion of audience for Baraka’s work. Students interested in imagism and projectivism, for example, will certainly value Baraka’s efforts as an effective use of those aesthetic doctrines toward the shaping of poetry of revolution appropriate for the time.

Baraka’s influence is apparent in the poetry of Sonia Sanchez and Ntozake Shange. What aspects of this influence, if any, might contribute to considerations of audience with regard to time and poetry?

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

In considering Baraka’s conscious use of language for poetic effect, comparisons with William Carlos Williams (for the use of the vernacular and the idiom) and with Ezra Pound (for its communicative focus) are appropriate. Sometimes in discussions of Baraka’s early poems, the criticism compares them in tone and theme—moral decay and social disillusionment—with T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land.*

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. Frank Smith discusses the “behind the eyeball” information a reader brings to text. Louise Rosenblatt discusses the expectations and experiences a reader brings to “transact” or negotiate meaning with text. Given those considerations of the reader, prediscussion questions might be designed to elicit from the reader whatever information or preconceptions he or she has about the author and/or his work. If the students are totally unfamiliar with Baraka, then questions eliciting experiential responses to the broad issues of theme or technique would be appropriate—“What, if anything, do the terms social fragmentation and/or moral decay mean to you?” “What would you imagine as a poetic attack on society? Or a poetic ethnic response to a dead or dying...
2. Writing assignments and topics for the students are derived from the assumption that as readers their participation is essential to meaning. Topics are not generally prescribed but, rather, derived from the questions about and interest in the author and his (Baraka’s) work. These assignments sometimes take the form of poetic responses, critical essays, or “dialogues” with Baraka.

Bibliography


Sonia Sanchez (b. 1934)

Contributing Editors: Joyce Joyce and John Reilly

Classroom Issues and Strategies
There is a widespread feeling that protest and politics are either inappropriate to literature or, if acceptable at certain times, the time for it has now passed.

The whole course should be founded upon an acceptance of the fact that there are no *a priori* definitions for literature. Poetry is what the poet writes or the audience claims as poetry. The real issues are whether or not the poet sets out a plausible poetics (one neither too solipsistic nor so undiscriminating as to dissolve meaning) and whether or not the practice of the poet has the local excitement and disciplined language to make it aesthetically satisfying. Upon these premises, the study of Sonia Sanchez can proceed with attention to her idea of revolutionary poetry associated with nation building, as it was discussed in the 1960s and 1970s.

Operating on the assumption that there is some common tradition underlying work of poets who declare ethnicity (African American) as their common identity, useful discussion is possible about ways Sanchez differs from Michael Harper and Jay Wright. What differences in aesthetic and practice account for the relative complexity of Harper and Wright when contrasted with Sanchez? But, then, what allows us to consider them all black poets? Surely not merely the selection of subject matter?

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

The historical and political are boldly set out in Sanchez’s poetry. The personal may be overlooked by the hasty reader, but the poetry develops a persona with a highly subjective voice conveying the impression of a real human being feeling her way to positions, struggling to make her expressive declarative writing conform to her intuitions and interior self. This tension once observed makes all the themes arranged around the black aesthetic and black politics also accessible.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

The “eye” devices (lowercase letters, speed writing, fluid lines) along with the free form of verse and vernacular word
choice are avant-garde devices seen in the work of many other poets. The point here is to see them associated with an aesthetic that privileges the oral and musical. For Sanchez it would be valuable to point to the frequency with which African-American poets allude to jazz performers, even making their lines sound like a musical instrument, just as, historically, musical instruments imitated the sounds of voice in early jazz and blues. This would make the vigor of the poem on the Righteous Brothers understandable, for music is a talisman of African-American culture. It would also set up a useful contrast between poetry written for print and poetry written to simulate the ephemerality of performed music or song.

**Original Audience**

For Sanchez these questions have great importance, for she has undergone important changes that have brought the spiritual and personal more forward in her verse. Dating her poems in connection with political events is very important. One might, for example, talk about an avowedly nationalist poetry written for a struggle to assert values believed to be a source of community solidarity. There are many parallels to suggest, including the writing of Irish authors in English, Jewish-American writers adapting the sounds of Yiddish to an exploration of traditional values in English, etc. Following the nationalist period of her work we see a shift of focus. One must ask students if the elements centered in the newer poems were not already present before. The appropriate answer (yes) will permit assertion of the developing nature of a writer’s corpus, something worth presenting in all courses.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

“Just Don’t Never Give Up on Love” could be contrasted with confessional verse such as Plath’s “Daddy” to distinguish the ways feeling can be dis-tanced. Similarly the feminist voices of Adrienne Rich and Marge Piercy can introduce subtle distinctions when contrasted with the same Sanchez narrative/poem. What, we might ask, is the basis of distinction: formal or attitudinal?

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Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. Recalling the use of the mask by Paul Laurence Dunbar, consider what differences have occurred to change the meaning of that image in the 88 years until Sanchez published “Masks.”

2. A society may be culturally diverse; yet, that does not mean that cultures are similarly powerful or influential. Discuss the way that Sonia Sanchez and other revolutionary black poets see the relationship between their culture and that of the dominant white society.

Bibliography


June Jordan (b. 1936)

Contributing Editor: Agnes Moreland Jackson

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students of the 1960s and early 1970s (as well as today's college-age youth) thought about and acted on nonfamilial kinships, that is, relationships between individuals having agency; groups, personhood in the community, space or turf—local/national/global; responsibility—private and corporate; power/powerlessness; most of the “-isms” and phobias of historical and contemporary societies worldwide. These are some of the recurring subjects in Jordan’s three poems included in The Heath Anthology and throughout her volumes of poetry and essays. She belongs to the world (though it despises and rejects her), and her voice of discovery, pain, rage, and resolution penetrates our minds and emotions. College students, therefore, recognize her concerns while also wondering sometimes whether Jordan’s societal and world portrait is “as bad” as her texts declare. Even those as wounded as she describes herself have to think deeply to make the connections, see the intricate patterns, and analyze situations to determine Jordan’s accuracy or error about social and human conditions. Because the issues in her poetry reflect our everyday experiences, we can comprehend Jordan’s poetry and note correspondences between and among the following: Jordan’s observations and protestations; daily news about victims of violence whose lives are affected by political and economic decisions. An invitation to discuss the poems here could prompt students’ own sharing of their personal experiences (of physical or emotional assault, acceptance or rejection of opportunity, and reaction to media images, health, and health services).

Moreover, hearing Jordan is crucial to appreciating and understanding the power of her poetry. Beyond urging my students to read all poetry aloud (and we read aloud in class), I stress the rich orality of poetic expression by many African Americans (from Dunbar to Hughes and Brown, from Hayden and Walker and Brooks to Evans and Sanchez and Cortez, as well as Lorde, Knight, Reed, Clifton, and Harper), among Copyright © Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.
whom Jordan is outstanding for the “being-spoken-now” qualities of her poems. Two of the “talking passages” (describing aptly the entire 114 lines) in “Poem about My Rights” are its opening and lines 45 to 49. Reading this poem aloud in a class need not be difficult in any college for at least two reasons: its personal, intimate, talking-directly-to-you quality and the generally acknowledged present-day awareness of the twenty-five percent probability that rape might become real to any woman in the U.S. Single voices (including those of male students) reading the poem in sequence diminish possible embarrassment over the sustained and repeated use of the words “rape,” “penetrate,” and “ejaculate” as reality and as metaphor. The poem’s insistence upon the equal status of all oppressions stimulates serious discussion that includes not only homo- and bisexuality; instead, interest remains for persistent philosophical quests to engage and understand freedom and responsibility, law and justice, power and respect, and so on. Students usually agree with the linking of all oppressions, not withstanding the risk of having to reveal their own characteristics and/or prejudices. Anglo males, especially, need time and much reassurance that female peers understand the socially constructed bases of male behavior deemed to be oppressive, for Jordan denounces hurtful action, not its causes—including females complicit in maintaining patriarchal privilege to oppress.

“To Free Nelson Mandela” has the oral qualities of a ritual chant. Its repetitions enhance (1) recognition of the many years of Mandela’s imprisonment and—hence—(2) the near miracle of his survival which invokes urgent and continually growing cosmic demands that he be freed, and (3) the power and rightness of a wife’s loyalty and work—instead of withdrawal into seclusion (hence, no Penelope is she but a warrior who has taken up the battle). However protracted, however gross, atrocities do not dehumanize their victims, nor can horror outlast living “waters of the world” as they “turn to the softly burning/light of the moon.” Ironically, almost mystically, atrocities eventually cause oppressed people, however despised, to come together in reaffirmation and in ritual, including the ceremonies of life to be lived fully before dying. (Cf. African slaves in the Western world, their understanding of self-worth, i.e., somebodiness conferred by a believed-in God—despite the ineffable horrors of bondage.)
Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

These three poems reveal the speakers’ firm understanding that their respective experiences (or those witnessed and reported on in “To Free Nelson Mandela”) validate the deduction by the speaker in “Poem about My Rights” that she and all other oppressed persons, nations, and peoples are victims because they are viewed by their torturers to be wrong. Therefore, wrong are the victims enumerated in lines 7 through 12 in “To Free Nelson Mandela”: the “twelve-year-old girl,” “the poet,” “the students,” “the chil-dren,” “[M]urdered Victoria Mxenge” (1.17) was wrong to have been a lawyer who “defended [B]lacks charged with political crimes” (The Holly-wood Reporter, July 19, 1991), writes the reviewer of the hit musical “Sarafina,” based on the horrors of and spiritual triumphs over South African apartheid. Martyred in 1985 in the midst of her daring and skillful work, “Durban human rights lawyer” (Agence France Presse, June 22, 1993) Mxenge was killed (by the official police, think most in the world) “the day before she was scheduled to defend 17 . . . [Black activists] on charges of treason” (Los Angeles Times, August 29, 1991). Her ANC-supporter spouse, Griffiths Mxenge, also a lawyer, had been murdered in 1981.

These data, only the tip of the iceberg, demonstrate again Jordan’s total immersion in the lives of oppressed people of color wherever they suffer in the world. Revelations in the 1990s—most carried in newspapers around the globe—about allegedly police-perpetrated murders in South Africa during the mid-1980s were not news to Jordan, who in 1989 had published the Mandela poem among other “new” poems composed between 1985 and 1989. From line 36 through line 57 of “To Free Nelson Mandela,” Jordan commemorates the beginning-to-heal black township community of Lingelihle (outside Cradock), where in 1985 (as reported in The Guardian of August 11, 1992, “[f]rom all over South Africa, tens of thousands of mourners converged on . . . [the township] . . . for the funeral of . . . [four Black activists]” including Matthew Goniwe, an “immensely popular leader” in a “ ‘backveld revolution’ [that had swept] South Africa” in 1983. Less poetic than Jordan’s rendering of Goniwe’s transformational impact on his comrades in suffering is the
Son of a domestic servant and a seller of firewood, he had inspired the community to form a residents’ association which demanded urgent reforms in the dusty, poverty-stricken township. Studious, quiet, small and bespectacled, Goniwe had raised educational standards, given self-respect to unemployed young [B]lacks and stopped much of the drinking and pot smoking. Repeatedly detained and accused of agitating, he remarked, “[Agitation] is not required when you have apartheid—the greatest agitator of all.”

(\textit{The Guardian}, 8/11/92)

The journalistic furor in 1992 about events in 1985 was sparked by the publication in June 1992 of an official, top-secret message “dated June 7, 1985” that revealed senior officers in South Africa’s security forces to have plotted the murders of Goniwe and three others. On March 9, 1991, \textit{The Chicago Tribune} had carried a report of Amnesty International’s having cited the death of Victoria Mxenge among other crimes against human rights.

In her 1976 essay “Declaration of an Independence I Would Just as Soon Not Have” (in the 1981 collection of essays, \textit{Civil Wars}, published by Beacon Press), in which she remarks on the practical necessity of folk’s uniting and working together to effect changes toward justice, Jordan writes of the “hunger and . . . famine afflicting some 800 million lives on earth” as “a fact that leaves . . . [one] nauseous, jumpy, and chronically enraged.” She says also that “with all . . . [her] heart and mind . . . [she] would strive in any way . . . to eradicate the origins of . . . [the] colossal exploitation and abuse” experienced by “[t]he multimillion-fold majority of the peoples on earth [who] are neither white, nor powerful, nor exempt from terrifying syndromes of disease, hunger, poverty that defies description, and prospects for worse privation or demeaning subsistence” (115–16; 117).

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well as her compassion and empathy, are large and constant, as can be recognized by even a quick reading of her poetry and essays.

Although not among her most recent poems, “Moving Towards Home” is as significant as any to be related to Jordan’s personal life, a life informed by her love of black people, a love that anchors her love for, and work and yearning for, freedom and justice for all oppressed people. She can relate to, can feel as, can be a Palestinian because the space, the room for living has become smaller and smaller geographically and in all other ways that destruction, death, bigotry, and hatred have crowded out life. “[T]o make our way home” would be to reclaim life, to reclaim “room” for “living” for ourselves and oppressed others.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Like many contemporary black and other poets of the U.S., Jordan uses language boldly and fully, not shying away from stereotypically or conventionally “ugly” words or ideas. Thus, she writes about what is real and what should not be: all manner of injustice, repression, oppression; diverse kinds of self- and personhood. “Poem about My Rights” captures most completely the unbounded range of Jordan’s subjects, as well as the rich juxtaposing and combining of free verse, linearly arranged sentences, parallelism, unpunctuated parenthetical remarks, repetition, freely (but not randomly) used virgules or slashes to hold or pull ideas together. Opening the poem in medias res gives form to Jordan’s repeated thesis that self-determination is precluded by all oppressions and any oppression—occurring in any order at any age anywhere on the earth, and perpetrated by nominal friends (e.g., parents, members of one’s own racial, sexual, occupational, and gender group) or recognized enemies. Jordan makes situational analogies and projections that meld all aspects of her being into one seamless personal: family; politics—local, national, worldwide, as well as racial and sexual; geography—general space, particular places, personified places, urban and rural spaces; history; esthetics; economics; her body and the bodies of others; sexism, racism, classism, ageism.
Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

As is true for her contemporaries Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde, sexuality is a crucial attribute of June Jordan’s identity and her premise for self-expression and interaction with others. These distinguished, radically iconoclastic writers demand full recognition of the “difference/s.” Lorde emphasizes her blackness, femaleness, lesbianism—in “butch” and “fem” roles (as I read her essays, particularly), her relatedness to all other women needing/seeking autonomy of personhood, and the ultimately fatal possession of her life by cancer. Progressively through her poetry and essays, Lorde becomes a winner, psychologically triumphant over all of these popularly acknowledged detractors from fullness of living. Rich defines herself as female, lesbian, white, southern, and a Jew. Together with emphatically engaging myriad and worldwide economic, cultural, educational, and political oppressions (as Jordan does), both Rich and Lorde, respectively as applicable, recognize and experience (as Jordan does) abuses of power—shaped usually as sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, classism, and ageism—and “triggered,” presumably, by the women’s “differences”—however ageless and normal, immutable, and real. For Jordan add bisexuality, that is, difference with a difference, and she stands out from the others in the triad. Possessing sexualities, Jordan experiences discrimination among the less complex or more “normal” lesbians. This experience is what seems to have clarified her view that any oppression equals all other oppressions without hierarchical or invidious distinctions. Jordan also refuses to privilege oppressors who are more “like” her than some other oppressors might be. Thus, African Americans and lesbians who would presume to judge her bisexuality or any attribute or freely chosen nonthreatening behavior toward others must be called what they are: tyrants (“A New Politics of Sexuality,” Technical Difficulties 90; the entire essay is must reading for any who would try to comprehend Jordan fully).

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

The following are suggestions for class enjoyment of
reading/thinking aloud about Jordan’s “Moving Towards Home”: (1) Do students detect any slowing down, possibly an emphasis at lines 35, 37, and in lines where the persona quotes other people’s voices? (2) Does it matter that readers might not/probably do not know the actual speakers: That the quoted passages might be/might not be historical? (3) Ask students to consider structure, meaning, and context by noting differences between the quoted passages and lines 47, 48, 49; (4) The importance of reading aloud and carefully can be stressed by discussing the difference between “those who dare” in lines 35, 39, 41 and “those who dare” in line 46; (5) Visual interest enhances that of sound as readers notice that “speak about” in the poem’s first thirty-one lines all line up/stack up, one above the next succeeding instance, that “about unspeakable events” breaks this pattern spatially as well as linguistically in the reversed order of the main words, and in the negativizing of “speak” by use of the prefix un. All events that the persona does “not wish to speak about” are spoken with chilling effect; about from line 53 to the end precedes home & living room; home envelopes living room.

Bibliography

Arnold Adoff’s 1973 anthology The Poetry of Black America includes four outstanding Jordan poems, while Erlene Stetson in Black Sister (1981) contains only one by Jordan (a must, however, about Native Americans) but six by Lorde, seven by Jayne Cortez, and three by Sanchez.

Etheridge Knight (1931–1991)

Contributing Editor: Patricia Liggins-Hill

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students often lack the knowledge of the new black aesthetic, the black oral tradition, and contemporary black poetry, in general. I lecture on major twentieth-century black poets and
literary movements. In addition, I provide supplementary research articles, primarily from BALF (Black American Literature Forum) and CLA (College Language Association).

Since Knight has read his poems on various college campuses throughout the country, I use tapes of his poetry readings. I also read his poetry aloud and invite students to do likewise, since his punctuation guides the reader easily through the oral poems.

Students, black and white, identify with the intense pain, loneliness, frustration, and deep sense of isolation Knight expresses in his prison poetry. They often compare their own sense of isolation, frustration, and depression as college students with his institutional experience.

Students often ask the following questions:

1. Why haven’t they been previously exposed to this significant poet and to the new black aesthetic?
2. How did Knight learn to write poetry so well in prison with only an eighth-grade education?
3. What is the difference between written and transcribed oral poetry?

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

Knight’s major themes are (1) liberation and (2) the black heritage. Since slavery has been a crucial reality in black history, much of Knight’s poetry focuses on a modern kind of enslavement, imprisonment; his work searches for and discovers ways in which a person can be free while incarcerated. His poems are both personal and communal. As he searches for his own identity and meaning in life, he explores the past black American life experience from both its southern and its African heritage.

Knight’s poetry should be taught within the historical context of the civil rights and black revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The social backdrop of his and other new black poets’ cries against racism were the assassinations of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., John and Robert Kennedy, also the burning of ghettos, the bombings of black schools in the South, the violent confrontations between white police and black people, and the strong sense of awareness of poverty in black communities.

What the teacher should emphasize is that—while
Knight shares with Baraka, Madhubuti, Major, and the other new black poets the bond of black cultural identity (the bond of the oppressed, the bond formed by black art, etc.)—he, unlike them, emerged after serving an eight-year prison term for robbery from a second consciousness of community. This community of criminals is what Franz Fanon calls “the lumpenproletariat,” “the wretched of the earth.” Ironically, Knight’s major contribution to the new aesthetic is derived from this second sense of consciousness which favorably reinforces his strong collective mentality and identification as a black artist. He brings his prison consciousness, in which the individual is institutionally destroyed and the self becomes merely one number among many, to the verbal structure of his transcribed oral verse.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Consider the following questions:

1. What is the new black aesthetic and what are Knight’s major contributions to the arts movement?
2. What are the black oral devices in Knight’s poetry and what are his major contributions to the black oral tradition?
3. What are the universal elements in Knight’s poetry?
4. In the “Idea of Ancestry” and “The Violent Space,” how does Knight fuse various elements of “time and space” not only to denote his own imprisonment but also to connote the present social conditions of black people in general?
5. How does Knight develop his black communal art forms in his later poems “Blues for a Mississippi Black Boy” and “Ilu, the Talking Drum”?
6. What are the major influences on Knight’s poetry? (Discuss the influences of Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, and Sterling Brown.)
7. How does Knight’s earlier poetry differ from his later poems? (Discuss in terms of the poet’s voice, tone, and techniques, e.g., oral devices, imagery.)

**Original Audience**

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Knight addresses black people in particular, and a mixed audience in general. He uses a variety of communal art forms and techniques such as blues idioms, jazz and African pulse structures, as well as clusters of communal images that link the poet and his experience directly to his reader/audience. For the latter, the teacher should use examples of images from “The Idea of Ancestry” and “The Bones of My Father” (if this poem is available).

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Walt Whitman are the major influences on Knight’s poetry. Knight’s “The Idea of Ancestry” flows in a Whitmanesque style and his “Blues for a Mississippi Black Boy” stems from the transcribed oral, blues poetic tradition of Hughes and Brown. He has indicated these influences in “An Interview with Etheridge Knight” by Patricia L. Hill (San Francisco Review of Books 3, no. 9 [1978]: 10).

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. (a) How does Knight’s poetry differ in content, form, and style from that of the earlier oral poets Hughes and Brown? How is his poetry similar to theirs?
   (b) How does Knight’s poetry differ in content, form, and style from that of Baraka, Madhubuti, and the other major new black aesthetic poets? How is his poetry similar to theirs?

2. (a) The Western “Art for Art’s Sake” Aesthetic Principle versus the New Black Aesthetic.
   (b) The Importance of Knight’s Prison “Lumpenproletariat” Consciousness to the New Black Aesthetic.
   (c) The Major Poetic Influences on Knight’s Poetry.
   (d) The Written and Oral Poetry Elements in Knight’s Poetry.
   (e) Whitman’s versus Knight’s Vision of America
   (f) Knight’s Open and Closed Forms of Poetry.
Bibliography


Alice Walker (b. 1944)

*Contributing Editor: Marilyn Richardson*

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

1. The bemused black women for whom a creative, witty, and compassionate union with the universe is as natural as breathing.
2. The volcanic forces that go into the creative life and work of a heroine like the narrator. See her account of her encounter with Bessie Smith.
3. The theft of black music by white musicians who do not understand what they are performing.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

The narrative voice in this story is deceptively informal and uneducated. Gracie Mae Still is in fact extremely subtle and sophisticated. The reader must put aside assumptions about her speech and learn from her on her own terms.

**Bibliography**

“Alice Walker Reads ‘nineteen fifty-five’ ” and an “Interview with Alice Walker,” in which she discusses the story, are tapes available from The American Audio Prose Library, P.O. Box 842, Columbia, MO 65205.
James Alan McPherson (b. 1943)

Contributing Editor: John F. Callahan

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students are unfamiliar with the railroads and the extent to which black men were a fraternity in the service jobs on the trains. There is some need to explain the argot of railroading, to familiarize students with the vocabulary and syncopated accents of the black vernacular.

Involve students with the rich variations of the oral tradition. Get them telling stories, in particular stories of how they met and came to know people of very different backgrounds because of summer jobs. It helps to read chunks of the story out loud.

Students are often interested in Youngblood’s attitude toward the storyteller and the storyteller’s attitude toward Doc Craft.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

The complexity and richness as well as the hardships of the lives lived by black traveling men; the initiative and kinship developed by the black workers; the qualities of the trickster; also the ways racism surcharges the attempts by blacks and whites to master situations and each other. Once again, the fact that the story is told by an old-timer about to quit (in 1964 or so) to Youngblood—the college student in a temporary job—about working on the road for the last twenty years or more sets up important contrasts between the past and the present, particularly the impact of technology on older ways of work and life.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

The relationship of oral storytelling as an initiation ritual to
McPherson’s craft of fiction writing, particularly his resolve to initiate readers of all races into a facet of their culture passing quickly out of sight.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

See Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues”; Ellison’s “King of the Bingo Game”; Walker’s “Nineteen Fifty-Five”; and Silko’s “Lullaby.”

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

What is the significance of the name Doc Craft?

**Bibliography**


Ernest J. Gaines (b. 1933)

*Contributing Editor: John F. Callahan*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

The simplicity and tautness of Gaines’s “The Sky Is Gray” sometimes lulls students to sleep and leads them, at first, not to look for some of the abiding, archetypal patterns in this story. Partly, this is due to the young boy’s voice. Given the changes in race relations between the time in which the story was set, then written, and now, students need to read very carefully to pick up the nuances of this 1940s social milieu.

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Instructor and students should read large chunks of the story out loud. Secondly, background on this milieu is very helpful; for this reason I urge that Gaines’s essay “Miss Jane and I” (*Callaloo* 1, no. 3 [May 1974]) be offered as a companion to the story.

Students often ask about the actuality of segregation—they wonder whether Gaines’s details are accurate. In addition, they ask whether the story’s voice is consistently that of the young boy James.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

The story is about a young boy having to grow up earlier than he might have wished or than the adults in his family might have wished because his father is serving in World War II. The boy’s mother must be father as well as mother to James. He learns about courage and dignity, about pain, and about the love and will that make pain bearable. The story also shows breaks in the color line enforced by Jim Crow laws and customs.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

How authentic are young James’s voice and point of view? How (and why) does Gaines rely on the oral tradition of storytelling in his fiction?

**Original Audience**

Gaines has said over and over again that he writes especially for young people, with particular reference to the young whites and, preeminently, the young blacks of the South. That is worth exploring along with three different layers of time: (1) the story’s time of the 1940s; (2) the writer’s time of the mid-1960s; and (3) the reader’s changing moment.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

Other relevant stories in Vol. 2 of the anthology include:
Faulkner’s “Barn Burning”; Wright’s “The Man Who Was Almost a Man”; Ellison’s “King of the Bingo Game”; and McPherson’s “A Solo Song: For Doc.”

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. When does James become a man?
2. How does James come into his own voice?

Bibliography

See the special issue of Callaloo 1, no. 3 (May 1978) devoted to Gaines and his work.

Some students may have difficulty with the rhythm of the demotic language in this selection. There are a few examples of what poet Edward Braithwaite calls “nation language,” author Marlene Nourbese Philip calls “cultural speech or demotic,” critic Houston Baker may term “the vernacular,” and some may call “dialect”—or worse yet—“slang”—for example, the term “jones,” which means habit or addiction, or even the “My Man” of the title, which bears the double valence of a greeting between men and the designation for a woman’s conjugal or cohabital partner. However, some students have more trouble with Bambara’s representation of the conversational cadence of Miss Hazel’s speech. The first four or five lines of the short story are a case in point. It might be helpful, therefore, for you to read a paragraph or so aloud and then to request a student to read a portion so that your class can develop an ear for this language that Bambara maintains is central to an African-American aesthetic.

In addition, students are finding it increasingly difficult to appreciate the political issues, motivations, and strategies of the sixties and seventies. Therefore, you might want to read from or to place on reserve some of the essays of Eldridge Cleaver, Claude Brown, Stokely Carmichael, or, better yet, assign passages of Alice Walker’s *Meridian*. Further, you might ask whether Miss Hazel is truly apolitical and whether the narrative’s critique of “the Movement” is necessarily an indictment or a repudiation of it.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

This short story begs us to read and to problematize issues of gender, race, age, and class; and to locate the intersection of these discourses. For example, Task, Elo, and Joe Lee’s
(mis)reading of their mother’s allegedly indecorous behavior with old blind Bovanne and her unseemly dress mark the discursive space where gender and age collide—would Hazel’s appearance and conduct be so egregious had she been younger?—and where the social construction of woman as mother denies her sexual agency—doesn’t her children’s reaction to Hazel’s dancing withhold from her the status of either subject or object of desire? Thus, she must deny the erotic content of her dance: “Wasn’t about tits.” But if it wasn’t about breasts as sensuous organs, was it about breasts as sources of nurture, and can the two functions be separated? The piece asks that we reconsider the body/bodies—female and male, young and old—and our culture’s complex readings of them—raced, sexed, aged—as they interact with each other, thereby constructing social meaning—mother/daughter (“puttin a hand on my shoulder like she hasn’t done since she left home and the hand landin light and not sure it supposed to be there”); mother/son and father/son (“Task run a hand over his left ear like his father for the world and his father before that”); woman/man (not just “sex starved [old folks],” nor just old men seeking and mature women dispensing “Mama comfort,” but also “vibrations” upon drum skins and a mutual “hummin” reminiscent of an encounter with the sacred, “like you in church again”). In the light of these constructions of the body/these touchings, how do we understand the ritual bathing described at the end of the story? And how do we understand the title of the short story?

Also, Miss Hazel’s body, specifically her hair, is one textual site where race and gender are problematized. Though Bambara, as a member of the Black Arts Movement, is one of many African-American authors of that era seeking to define and exemplify a black aesthetic (see Addison Gayle, *The Black Aesthetic*), her fiction avoids a simplistic essentialism both through the tropes of Hazel’s wig and cornrows as well as by Elo’s self-censorship, her uncompleted assertion that the generation gap is a white phenomenon.

Bambara, who has always identified herself first as a social and political activist/community organizer, is acutely aware of the contradictions in some so-called grassroots movements that depend[ed] on the uncredited and unrewarded labor of women (see Walker, *Meridian*, Paula Giddings, *When and Where We Enter*, or Bambara, *the Salt Eaters*) and that give only lip service to respecting and empowering the
enfranchised poor, elderly, and disabled.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

The Eleanor Traylor introduction to this short story stresses the importance of black speech in and the orality of Bambara’s work. Pay particular attention, therefore, to the cadence/rhythm and tone of this very conversational piece, an episode, related to the reader as if she and Miss Hazel were talking over a cup of herb tea, embedded, as are all good oral narratives, with pieces of other conversations among the related incident’s participants. Appreciate as well Hazel’s irony and wit.

**Original Audience**

Toni Cade Bambara, writing in the late sixties and early seventies, is speaking to a new generation of African Americans who are avidly reading reprinted works by black authors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and who are equally eager for each new book off the press. Teachers in newly formed black studies departments are beginning to educate students and their professorial colleagues to the value of black texts and the strategies for reading them. So Bambara can write in her highly original, but still culturally situated, voice and expect a wide and racially diverse audience for whom she need not translate her idiom.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

In the foregoing discussion, I have already suggested Alice Walker as an author with whom one might compare Bambara; in addition to *Meridian*, there are short stories in *In Love and Trouble* that treat some of the same themes. Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones* examines, among other things, mother-daughter conflict, but among Caribbean immigrants in Brooklyn. And both for the complex and subtle exploration of the issues of race, gender, and sexuality as well as for the lyrical linguistic cadence representing black speech, compare...
Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

I have already suggested some questions in the preceding discussion of major themes; for example, one might ask students about the significance of the title, or about the “meaning” of the ritual bathing at the end of the story. Also, because the persona of Miss Hazel requires students of traditional college age to step into the skin of a more mature adult and to empathize with their antagonist across the gender gap, you might ask them about what they learned from this experience.

Lucille Clifton (b. 1936)

Contributing Editor: James A. Miller

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Clifton’s poetry is generally very accessible, so accessible that careless readers may overlook the way she often achieves her poetic effects. Her poetry is best read aloud and students should be encouraged to read and hear her poems first, then to explore issues of language, form, and theme.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Clifton is deeply concerned with the ways in which the weight of racial memory and history extends into the present, with family and community history, and with the possibilities of transcendence and reconciliation. A deeply spiritual vein shapes much of her poetry, which conveys a sense of wonder and mystery as well as optimism and resilience.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

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Clifton’s poems seem guided by the dictates of her own experience and consciousness rather than by any *a priori* sense of form or poetic conventions. Her primary commitment is to economical, everyday language, and to the rhythmic and musical qualities of the language that shapes her poems.

**Original Audience**

Clifton’s first collection of poems, *Good Times*, was published during the heyday of the Black Arts Movement and her early work in particular owes important debts to the mood and outlook of that period, particularly in her celebration of the ordinary life of African Americans.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

Clifton can fruitfully be compared with other African-American women poets who emerged out of the same historical moment—Mari Evans, June Jordan, and Sonia Sanchez, for example—but she can also be read in conjunction with Amiri Baraka and Etheridge Knight. Her poems can also be compared with those of her predecessors like Langston Hughes, Sterling A. Brown, Margaret Walker, Robert Hayden, and Gwendolyn Brooks. And intriguing relationships can also be established between her works and the poems of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

1. Discuss the domestic images in “The Thirty Eighth Year” and “I Am Accused of Tending to the Past.” How do images of nurturing function in these poems? What is the relationship of these images to the consciousness which shapes the poems?

2. Discuss the function of history in Clifton’s poems. What, for example, is the poet seeking “at the cemetery, walnut grove plantation, south carolina, 1989”? Is there any relationship between this poem and “Reply”??
3. Discuss the relationship between “I” and “Them” in “in white america.” Trace the development of the poem through the final stanza and comment upon the resolution the poem achieves.

Bibliography


N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) (b. 1934)

*Contributing Editor: Kenneth M. Roemer*

Classroom Issues and Strategies

In several areas, teachers of *Rainy Mountain* are in agreement. For example, whether an instructor uses excerpts or the entire
book (the University of New Mexico paperback is the best classroom edition), acquainting students with a few of Momaday’s other works can help them to establish important thematic, generic, and cultural contexts for reading *Rainy Mountain*. Especially relevant are the two sermons delivered by the Kiowa Priest of the Sun in Momaday’s novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968), the intense Oklahoma landscape descriptions (for example, Book 3, Section 4) in *Ancient Child* (1989), and Momaday’s essay “The Man Made of Words” (available in Geary Hobson’s anthology *The Remembered Earth* [1979/1981]), which outlines the major phases of composition of *Rainy Mountain* and sets forth Momaday’s theory of language. The excellent interviews in Charles Woodard’s *Ancestral Voice* (1989), especially in the “Center Holds” and “Wordwalker” sections, in Matthias Schubnell’s *Conversations with N. Scott Momaday* (1997), offer significant insights into Momaday’s concepts of identity and language.

Beyond recommending an acquaintance with *House Made of Dawn* and “Man Made of Words,” there is little agreement among teachers of *Rainy Mountain* about how much “background” information students “need to know” in order to “understand” Momaday’s book. This apparent confusion can become the focus for classroom discussions of an important question. How can works frequently omitted from literary canons and characterized by unfamiliar subject matter and unusual forms of expression be made accessible and meaningful to “typical” college students? One approach to this question is to ask students to complete their first readings and initial discussions of the excerpts from *Rainy Mountain* before they have received any background information; students should even be discouraged from reading the headnote in *The Heath Anthology*. The initial discussion can center on questions about what type of writing the excerpts represent (e.g., should they be in a poetry section?) and about what types of information (if any) they think they need to understand the excerpts.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

The forms and themes of *Rainy Mountain* suggest numerous other classroom strategies, many of which are described in
detail in Part Two of Approaches to Teaching Momaday’s The Way to Rainy Mountain, and in my College English essay on teaching survey courses (37 [1976]: 619–24).

The importance of landscape in Momaday’s book also suggests a way to bridge discussions of nineteenth-century classic American literature and Rainy Mountain. As J. Frank Papovich has argued in “Landscape, Tradition and Identity” in Perspectives on Contemporary Literature (12 [1986]: 13–19), students should be made aware that there are alternatives to the concept of the American landscape articulated in the myth of the isolated male hero escaping from domesticity and society to confront the challenges of the wilderness. By contrast, Momaday’s nature is a place teeming with intricate networks of animal, human, and cosmic life connected by mutual survival relationships, story-telling traditions that embrace social gatherings at his grandmother’s house as well as the growth of a babe into the Sun’s wife, and an imagination that can transform an Oklahoma cricket into a being worthy of kinship with the moon.
**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Autobiography, epic, sonnet, prose-poem, history, folktale, vision, creation hymn, lyrical prose, a collection of quintessential novels—these are a few of the labels critics, scholars, and N. Scott Momaday have used to describe *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. The four essays in the “Critical Contexts: Forms” section of *Approaches to Teaching Momaday’s The Way to Rainy Mountain* (47–77) invite students to discuss the appropriateness of these terms.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

I recommend comparisons between Momaday’s written excerpts and parallel Kiowa oral narratives or pictorial histories (e.g., comparing the buffalo story in XVI to the narrative in Maurice Boyd’s *Kiowa Voices*, Vol. 2 [1983, 70–73] or comparing the descriptions in XVII of how women were treated to James Mooney’s accounts drawn from Kiowa calendar histories in *Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians* [1898, 1979: 280, 281, 294]). For other possible comparisons, see Appendix B of my *Approaches to Teaching Momaday’s The Way to Rainy Mountain*.

Within the context of American literature courses, various comparative studies can be made between *Rainy Mountain* and other more familiar works. Instructors interested in narrative structure can compare Momaday’s discontinuous and multivoiced text to poetic works by Edgar Lee Masters, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound and to prose works by Sherwood Anderson and William Faulkner.

Momaday’s treatment of identity formation can be compared to other authors’ attempts to define personae who—because of their ethnic heritage, gender, or class status—had to integrate creatively the apparently unrelated elements of their mainstream and nonmainstream backgrounds and experiences.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

One participatory approach to the identity issue is to require
students to select a significant landscape in their own backgrounds and to use this selection as the basis for composing three-voice sections modeled on the structure of Rainy Mountain. See my “Inventive Modeling” article in College English 46 (1984): 767–82 and Jean Molesky-Poz and Lauren Muller’s “Native American Literatures: Pedagogies for Engaging Student Writing,” American Quarterly (45 [1993]: 596–630).

Bibliography


James Welch (Blackfeet-Gros Ventre) (b. 1940)
Classroom Issues and Strategies

Welch’s fiction is immediately accessible. Students find it powerful. They shirk from its relentlessly depressing impact, but Welch has written *Winter in the Blood, The Death of Jim Loney*, and much of his poetry to create that impact. His writing is protest literature, so skillfully achieved that it seems apolitical.

Sometimes hostile to the completely new, students today seem to be willing to rely on canon choices. Once Welch is placed for them, they respond with empathy to his fiction.

The general setting of the culture, the hardships generations of Native Americans have learned to live with, the socioeconomic issues make deciphering characters’ attitudes easier. The strengths of the Indian culture need to be described as well, because students in many parts of the country are unfamiliar with customs, imagery, and attitudes that are necessary in reading this excerpt.

Welch’s precision and control must be discussed. Students must see how they are in his power throughout this excerpt. Further, they must want to read not only this novel, but the others as well.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

It is also good to emphasize the choice of art as profession. For Welch, giving voice to frustration has created memorable fiction and poetry. His most recent novels, *Fools Crow* and *Indian Lawyer*, do much more than depict the alienation of the contemporary Native American man—but to do so, he draws on nineteenth-century history as the basis of his plot in *Fools* and a different stratum of culture for *Lawyer*.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions
Questions of realism and how realistic writing is achieved: characterization, language, situation, emphasis on dialogue rather than interior monologue.

Questions of appropriateness: What is believable about the fiction, and how has Welch created that intensity that is so believable? Why is a plot like this more germane to the lives Welch describes than an adventurous, action-filled narrative would have been?

Original Audience

The issue of political literature (which will occur often in selections from the contemporary section) will need attention. How can Welch create a sympathetic hero without portraying the poverty and disillusion of a culture? How can he achieve this accuracy without maligning Native Americans?

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Ernest Hemingway and Richard Wright are obvious choices for comparison, but the differences are important as well. Wright relied in many cases on dialect, with language spelled as words might have been pronounced, and Hemingway used carefully stylized language in his quantities of dialogue, so that identifying characters by place or education was sometimes difficult. Welch creates a dialect that is carefully mannered, as if the insecure speaker had modeled his language, like his life, on the middle-class TV image of a person and a family.

Vietnam Conflict

Michael Herr (b. 1940)

*Contributing Editor: Raymund Paredes*

Classroom Issues and Strategies

It’s probably necessary and certainly a good idea to provide
some sort of historical context for the consideration of Herr’s work. This can be done by assigning supplementary reading or lecturing on the history of the Vietnam War. As a Vietnam War veteran myself, I relate my own personal experiences of the war to students to compare with Herr’s. If you, or any older students, have direct experience with the Vietnam era, this is a useful approach. There are many good films about Vietnam (both feature and documentary) that could complement Herr’s book.

Students respond very strongly to the graphic depiction of the inhumanity and insanity of the war. They want to know more about the causes of the Vietnam War and the political climate of the United States at the time.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

The major themes in the excerpted passage are: the dehumanizing and brutalizing influences of war, particularly the way war renders soldiers incapable of functioning in “normal” social circumstances; the relationship between the writer’s style and presentation of the war and the drug culture of the 1960s and 1970s; and the author’s view that the war was fundamentally immoral, even more so than other wars. Key here is Herr’s use of the Spanish phrase “la vida loca” (the crazy life). On a personal level, Herr emphasizes his troubling, even macabre, attraction to the war, its combination of bloodshed, madness, camaraderie, and heroism.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

*Dispatches* is an extraordinary work stylistically, a brilliant execution of the speaking styles of young American soldiers: fast paced, full of slang, very much shaped by popular culture (films, television, rock and roll music) and the drug culture. Herr is also adept at capturing the officialese of the U.S. military establishment. Many of the formal and stylistic qualities of *Dispatches* connect Herr to postmodernism.
Original Audience

Dispares is a very contemporary book in terms of its values and its points of view. It is a book about young men written by a young man.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Herr’s work can be compared to that of other writers about the Vietnam War and with the so-called “new journalists” such as Tom Wolfe. The second connection is especially interesting. Students might note how Herr uses literary/fictional techniques—figurative language, characterization, narrative development—in what is ostensibly, as indicated by the title, a work of journalism. Students might look at other treatments of the Vietnam War—both fictional and journalistic—to compare points of view about the war, its impact on the humanity of the soldiers, etc.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. What is the author’s attitude toward the war? What are the effects of the war on human behavior? From your knowledge, is Herr’s position on the war widely shared?
2. How would you describe Herr’s style? In what ways is Herr’s style compatible (or not) with its subject? From what sources does Herr draw his images, his metaphors? How does this compare with the practices of other writers? In what sense is the notion of “la vida loca” symbolic of both the literary situation and the temper of the times?

Bibliography

Other books on Vietnam are very useful. I recommend: Stanley Karnow’s Vietnam, Neil Sheehan’s A Bright Shining Lie, Wallace Terry’s Bloods, and Philip Caputo’s A Rumor of War.
Classroom Issues and Strategies

With each passing year, the American war in Vietnam recedes further from our collective memory. Our current undergraduates were born roughly ten years after the United States pulled its troops out of Southeast Asia in 1975. Their images of that conflict largely come from such movies as Apocalypse Now (1979), Full Metal Jacket (1987), and Platoon (1986). Providing some historical context seems a necessity, especially as Tim O’Brien himself rejects the popular image of the Vietnam War promoted by these movies. Michael Bibby has recently argued that the Vietnam War is constitutive of the postmodern condition, and while I disagree, finding the origins of postmodernism predating the war and not restricted to the American scene, Bibby rightly reminds us of the deep and lasting influence of that divisive war in U.S. culture (The Vietnam War and Postmodernity, 1999).


To help students appreciate O’Brien’s attitude toward the war, consider reviewing with them one of his early essays on the
subject, “The Violent Vet” (Esquire, Dec. 1979). Among other things, that essay criticizes Hollywood’s depiction of the war’s madness as being inaccurate and too simple an explanation, one that relieves us of the duty of serious retrospection. It also argues for the universality of the soldier’s war experience to counter the myth of the Vietnam War as somehow aberrant.

You might provide to students the other stories in The Things They Carried related to Kiowa’s death (“Speaking of Courage” and “Notes”; less directly, “Field Trip”), and ask students to reflect on how these stories either challenge or reinforce the themes and style of “In the Field.” O’Brien’s most anthologized pieces, “The Things They Carried” and “How to Tell a True War Story” (both in Things), are easily accessible, and afford other points of comparison and insight. The other significant reading that can lead to fruitful discussion is the chapter “July” in O’Brien’s war memoir If I Die in a Combat Zone. O’Brien has described his artistic method as a mixing of memory and imagination, and clearly he transformed the real event described in this chapter to create the fictional situation of Kiowa’s death. In “How to Tell a True War Story,” he asserts that factual occurrence may be less true than a story that never happened. Do students agree that “In the Field,” despite its status as fiction, strikes more deeply at the war’s truth than does the nonfiction account in “July”?

Finally, studying literature from Vietnam offers an excellent opportunity for personal interaction between students and veterans. Finding veterans to bring into class should not be difficult. I have had students for whom reading O’Brien enabled them, for the first time in their lives, to talk with veterans close to them, like fathers and uncles, about the war. Colleagues of mine have arranged for students to interview veterans through the local Department of Veterans Affairs, and to turn those interviews into meaningful essays.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

1. The two major themes of “In the Field” are interrelated and involve every American’s moral responsibility for waging the war. First, the story makes quite explicit that both everybody and nobody bear the blame for Kiowa’s
death: the headquarters for assigning the platoon to set up in the shit field, the lieutenant for failing to disobey a bad order, the North Vietnamese for firing the mortars, the anonymous young soldier for shining his flashlight on a picture of a girl (perhaps the girl herself for inspiring the picture, inspiring the soldier to carry it and share it, and perhaps whoever took the photograph), Azar for making jokes, the weather and the river and the villagers for creating the shit field, even “an old man in Omaha” for forgetting to vote. Second, Kiowa’s getting sucked into the shit field becomes a metaphor for the U.S.’s getting sucked into the quagmire that was the Vietnam War. By extension, everybody and nobody bear the blame for the war. The anonymous soldier, in this context, might be read as a kind of Everyman.

2. O’Brien’s writing career circles around the personal issue of his own moral accountability. He did not agree with the war, and modestly protested it during college. Yet he allowed himself to be drafted—he neither found a legal way to dodge the draft nor did he take the illegal and bolder option of fleeing to Canada. Partially, he allowed himself to be drafted because he felt he “owed” his small Minnesota town. “For twenty-one years I’d lived under its laws, accepted its education, eaten its food, wasted and guzzled its water, slept well at night, driven across its highways, dirtied and breathed its air, wallowed in its luxuries” (If I Die). In other words, he felt the obligation of a social contract. Perhaps “In the Field” can be read against O’Brien’s persistent moral struggle. On one level, by acknowledging the soldier’s function as agent of the state and society, O’Brien shifts some of the blame and guilt off himself. On another level, by shifting blame away from soldiers, he admits that he could never have completely avoided some responsibility for the war even if he had managed to evade combat duty. As he writes in “How to Tell a True Story,” in a slightly different context, “the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity.”

3. In interview after interview, O’Brien has insisted that his war stories aren’t only about the war, sometimes not about the war at all, but he uses the immediacy, drama, and ambiguity of his war experience to explore issues more universal to the human condition. “In the Field” is
not the best example of this, though we can somewhat broaden the story’s themes and achieve wider applicability. The web of contributing causes to Kiowa’s death suggest the complex and ultimately indeterminate causality of any event. It proposes the degree to which we are all responsible to one another. Finally, by shifting its perspective among the soldiers, the story dramatizes the subjective nature of all experience, not just war.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

1. “In the Field” constantly shifts the storytelling perspective among the soldiers. This structural decision reinforces the story’s meaning or moral, specifically how Kiowa’s death—and the war itself and everything about it—are both nobody’s and everybody’s fault. “Speaking of Courage” and “Notes” extend this technique by adding the voices of Norman Bowker and the book’s narrator (named “Tim O’Brien”). Bringing these two voices into class discussion might help students better understand Norman’s role in this story, and the final line in “Notes” adds another dimension to the ambiguity of complicity. In discussing Norman Bowker’s story and the actions Bowker took that might have contributed to Kiowa’s death, “Tim O’Brien” states that “that part of the story is my own.” Does he mean that he, the narrator, took the actions the other story attributes to Bowker, or does he mean that he, the narrator, the author of Bowker’s tale, invented the entire thing?

2. This shifting of perspectives also enhances the story’s realism by providing a kind of *fog of war* reading experience—a technique employed in other twentieth-century war fiction, like Shelby Foote’s *Shiloh* (1952) and Michael Shaara’s *Killer Angels* (1974). The very bare, direct language reinforces the story’s realism; indeed since Hemingway and the other major post–Great War prose authors, such stark, “realistic” language seems almost a requisite for war fiction. Even with O’Brien’s more fantastic war novel, *Going After Cacciato*, he insists upon a realistic rendering of a soldier’s flight of fancy while passing the time on guard
3. The story begins in the middle of the search for Kiowa (in medias res), and refuses to proceed chronologically. This places the reader into the story instantly, and pulls the reader along by unfolding the facts piecemeal. The story in fact has no climax; the most climactic event of this story (and “Speaking of Courage” and “Notes”), Kiowa’s death, occurs beforehand. By refusing to include a climax as the turning point of the plot, O’Brien further reconstructs any sense of simple causality. The nonlinear, even recursive nature of the narrative reflects the nonlinear, even recursive experience of the Vietnam War and war in general. In this story, three soldiers discover Kiowa’s rucksack and begin “circling out” from there to look for his body, perhaps serving as a metaphor for this narrative method.

4. “In the Field”’s realism makes it challenging to discuss O’Brien in the context of stylistic postmodernism. If postmodernism constitutes an important part of your course, I would strongly recommend having your students read “Speaking of Courage” and “Notes.” These stories have a metafictional element through the “Tim O’Brien” narrator, a character who is distinct from the author even though both have apparently authored some of the same stories and have nearly identical biographies.

5. The Things They Carried had a peculiar composition process. Many of the pieces were written and published individually over the course of several years. When O’Brien decided to make a collection, he wrote new pieces, modified a number of the original ones, and ordered them in a very deliberate sequence. The result is a book that falls somewhere between a novel and a story collection. If it fits your pedagogical goals, invite your students to compare the original versions of these stories with the book’s versions (e.g., “Speaking of Courage,” Massachusetts Review 17 [1976]).
O’Brien’s moral and his direct language suggest that he wants to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. He has expressed some dissatisfaction that war fiction does not tend to attract women readers. The most meaningful feedback on his work comes from women who tell him that he communicated the war experience to them better than anyone, and helped them understand the veterans in their lives. “The joy is not the joy of touching veterans or touching people who have lived what you have lived,” O’Brien has said in an interview. “The joy is just the opposite . . . because the purpose of art is to touch the human heart in its solidarity and solidity.” This is not to say that O’Brien writes specifically for women, rather that he tries to make his fiction accessible, enjoyable, and meaningful for all readers.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

1. Compare and contrast the O’Brien selection with those by other Vietnam veterans included in this anthology, especially Robert Bly’s war poems. The significant exercise here is in contrasting the messages and the styles of the authors, for by distinguishing them we can begin to reconstruct the clichéd images, popular conceptions, and common stereotypes about that war. In contrasting O’Brien and Herr, it might help to inform students that the latter contributed to the screenplays of both Apocalypse Now and Full Metal Jacket (for O’Brien’s feelings about the Hollywood image of the Vietnam Veteran, see “The Violent Vet” [Esquire, Dec. 1979]).

2. Compare the O’Brien story with pieces (especially stories) by veterans from other wars, like Hemingway. Does the modern war experience tend to generate a “realist” style?

3. You might also compare this story’s style with that of contemporary stories in this anthology, specifically the more postmodern stories like John Barth’s. I would recommend reading additional works by O’Brien (intelligent selections from The Things They Carried, such as “Speaking of Courage” and “Notes”) if you want a solid inquiry of O’Brien in a postmodern context.
O’Brien’s status as a postmodern stylist is, I believe, very debatable, and may help to focus more general definitional discussions.

4. Students interested in film might want to compare Apocalypse Now with A Soldier’s Sweetheart (1998), a fairly faithful screen adaptation of O’Brien’s “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” (in Things), with Kiefer Sutherland as Rat Kiley and Georgina Cates as Mary Anne, and the only film of any O’Brien work. Both movies are in dialogue with Conrad’s Heart of Darkness.

5. A few of the canonized Vietnam novels to which you might direct interested students (or add to your syllabus) are O’Brien’s Going After Cacciato (1978), Robert Stone’s Dog Soldiers (1974), Stephen Wright’s Meditations in Green (1983), John M. Del Vecchio’s The Thirteenth Valley (1982), Larry Heinemann’s Paco’s Story (1986), and William Eastlake’s The Bamboo Bed (1969). Poets include John Balaban, W. D. Ehrhart, Walter McDonald, Bruce Weigl, and Yusef Komunyakaa. David Rabe is the most prominent dramatist.

Questions for Reading and Discussion

1. What kills Kiowa? Is it any one event or exact sequence of events?
2. Elsewhere in The Things They Carried, O’Brien writes that a “true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it” (“How to Tell a True War Story”). Does this story support that assertion? If not, what moral or morals does it propose? Is the assertion that “a true war story is never moral” itself a kind of moral, a declaration of value?
3. How does the story serve as a metaphor for something bigger? In other words, might we equate the shit field that sucks in Kiowa with the war?
4. This story is an imaginative reinvention of an actual episode that occurred during O’Brien’s tour of duty in
Vietnam. For O’Brien, *happening-truth* (what actually happened) can be less true than *story-truth* (what only happened in fiction). The fictional status of this story (and the book) bothers some readers—it diminishes its power. Do these readers have a higher expectation of actuality for works about the Vietnam War, and if that is the case, why? Do any students agree with O’Brien’s artistic philosophy?

5. In other writings O’Brien has observed that when the enemy is so thoroughly mixed in with the local civilian population, and when the enemy lives in the villages, hides in the jungle, and tunnels underground, it seems that the land itself becomes “the true enemy—the physical place, the soil and the paddies” (“The Vietnam in Me”). How does this help explain the lieutenant’s choice to set his escapist fantasies on a golf course?

6. Lieutenant Jimmy Cross calls the anonymous young soldier “not a man, really,” but “a boy.” The average age for soldiers in Vietnam was about the same age as traditional undergraduates. Do any of your students have siblings or friends who enlisted in the military instead of going to college? Would any of your students consider joining the service? Would any of them refuse to serve? Would it depend upon the war? How has Vietnam, the Gulf War, and recent war movies (e.g., *Saving Private Ryan*) affected your students’ feelings about war and military duty? Such questions get at the heart of O’Brien’s concerns, and do it in a very personal way.

7. Kiowa is a Native American. What might O’Brien be suggesting by this fact?

**Approaches to Writing**

1. Students often have very immediate and strong responses to O’Brien’s short stories. Ask students to record their responses, and use their writing to explore those responses.

2. Encourage students to talk with a veteran, either a family member, a family friend, or a stranger. A personal encounter can lead to a third-person retelling of the veteran’s story or a first-person reflection on the encounter. Alternatively, ask students to research and
write about a soldier who did not return from Vietnam, either as a result of being killed or missing in action.

3. Have students write a formal essay comparing any two (or more) of the texts mentioned in this guide (two stories, different versions of the same story, story with essay, different writers, etc.). Similarly, have students write a formal essay exploring any of the discussion prompts in this guide.

4. Images from the Vietnam War—still photos or motion films—are readily available. Ask students to compare how different artistic forms (fiction, creative nonfiction, visual arts) work to generate different responses. Hollywood’s response to the war also gives an excellent opportunity for student reflection in writing.

**Bibliography**


O’Brien, Tim. *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. New York: Delacorte, 1973; New York, Copyright © Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.
Norman Mailer (b. 1923)

Classroom Issues and Strategies

To begin with, any approach to teaching Norman Mailer’s work must take into consideration his flamboyant and controversial public image, which often obscures critical responses to the works. Amazingly, many college students will not recognize Mailer’s name at first; but those who do will very probably be armored in negative preconceptions, often based on incomplete or erroneous information.

The selections from *The Armies of the Night* presented in the anthology provide an opportunity to deal effectively with this issue: Mailer is ultimately shown, not as an unconscionable egotist presenting himself as his own hero, but as a rather self-deprecating narrator/protagonist. For example, crossing the line of MP’s in his act of civil disobedience, he describes himself as a somewhat ridiculous figure.

“It was his dark pinstripe suit, his vest . . . the barrel chest, the early paunch—he must have looked like a banker himself, a banker, gone ape!” (pp. 150–151, Signet edition).

Again, before being arrested, Mailer feels, almost unwillingly, that “a deep modesty was on its way to him . . . as well as fear, yes now he saw it, fear of the consequences of this weekend in Washington” (Signet, p. 93).

This emerging new sense of self leads to a crucial realization: “No, the only revolutionary truth was a gun in the hills, and that would not be his, he would be too old by then, and too incompetent, yes, too incompetent said the new modesty, and too showboat, too lacking in essential judgment” (Signet, p. 94).

Yet despite the constant interplay here (as in his life and work as a whole) between the performer and the thoughtful
commentator, what looms far larger is Mailer’s evocative capacity to strike to the heart of an issue of national significance in his prose. Consider the forceful and moving conclusion to The Armies of the Night, entitled “The Metaphor Delivered” (Signet, p. 320).

The unusual point of view used in this book, which was to become a hallmark of Mailer’s nonfiction of the 1970s, provides interesting possibilities for a discussion of point of view and genre.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

The historical themes are obvious from the nature of The Armies of the Night and its relationship to the Vietnam War. Mailer’s preoccupation with existential choice, personal courage, and integrity are evident in the passages selected.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

As I have explained in my headnote, Mailer’s development from a derivative and naturalistic vision in The Naked and the Dead (1948) to a unique and highly existential one in later works such as An American Dream (1965) is evident in The Armies of the Night. The concept of the “nonfiction novel” and the unusual third-person participant/narrator point of view are important in any discussion of Armies and Mailer’s subsequent work.

Original Audience

It is interesting and important to discuss the significance (or perceived insignificance) of those events recounted in The Armies of the Night to today’s students. Further, my footnotes will to some degree ameliorate unfamiliarity with particular people or events.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

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Parallels can be drawn to Ernest Hemingway’s *Green Hills of Africa* (1935), Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) and even *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907). Further, Mailer’s early work, notably *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) was influenced profoundly by James T. Farrell, John Dos Passos, and John Steinbeck.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. Do you find Mailer’s use of himself as a third-person participant effective or confusing? This book, which won both a Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, has often been cited, along with Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) as an example of the “new journalism.” But a similar point of view was used by Henry Adams in *The Education of Henry Adams* as early as 1907, and the concept of a “nonfiction novel” dates back at least as far as Ernest Hemingway’s *Green Hills of Africa* (1935). Does this relatively unusual form attract or repel you?

2. Mailer writes (Signet, p. 63): “The American corporation executive . . . was perfectly capable of burning unseen women and children in the Vietnamese jungles, yet felt a large displeasure and fairly final disapproval at the generous use of obscenity in literature and public.” Do you agree with Mailer that depersonalized governmental violence is more obscene than the use of four-letter words?

3. Consider Mailer’s final statements in “The Metaphor Delivered.” Do you feel that Mailer, despite his antiwar civil disobedience, is a patriot? Do the U.S. Marshals who think him a traitor love their country more? Were you emotionally moved by this conclusion?

4. These events took place more than thirty years ago. Do they seem to have any bearing on your life, and on the America you live in today, or do they seem like ancient history? Are the participants (e.g., Robert Lowell, Dwight MacDonald) familiar or alien to you?

5. Can you envision any future national situation in which similar demonstrations might occur? Are there any that you might find justifiable?
Bibliography

“The Armies of the Night,” in The Structured Vision of Norman Mailer by Barry H. Leeds (NYU Press, 1969) seems to help render the book more accessible to my students. Chapter 8. Also:


Robert Bly (b. 1926)

Teaching material for Robert Bly is available on The Heath Anthology web site. (To access the site, please go to the Houghton Mifflin college home page at http://college.hmco.com. Select English, then select The Heath Anthology textbook site.)

Yusef Komunyakaa (b. 1947)

Contributing Editor: Linda Wagner-Martin

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Born in Bogalusa, Louisiana, the oldest of five children, Komunyakaa was the son of a carpenter and of a mother who bought a set of encyclopedias for her children. When he was sixteen, he discovered James Baldwin’s essays and decided to become a writer himself. From 1965 to 1968, Komunyakaa served a tour of duty in Vietnam as an information specialist, editing a military
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newspaper called the Southern Cross. There he won the bronze star. After military service, he enrolled at the University of Colorado as a double major in English and sociology, where he began writing poetry. Upon graduation in 1980, he studied further at both Colorado State University (where he received the M.A. in Creative Writing) and the University of California, Irvine, where he received an MFA. He then taught at various universities before moving to New Orleans. While teaching at the University of New Orleans, in 1985, he married Australian novelist Mandy Sayer.

Only then, nearly twenty years after his Vietnam experiences, did Komunyakaa write his important war poems, published in 1988 as Dien Cai Dau. The violence of war, the pain of identifying with the Vietnamese, and the anguish of returning to the States had seldom been so eloquently and hauntingly expressed. By 1994, when these poems were included in Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems, 1977–1989, Komunyakaa had already won two creative writing fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the San Francisco Poetry Center Award, and had held the Lilly Professorship of Poetry at Indiana University. Neon Vernacular received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, as well as the Kingsley-Tufts Poetry Award from the Claremont Graduate School, and as a result his earlier eight collections of work have been reevaluated.

In 1998 his poetry collection Thieves of Paradise was a finalist for the 1999 National Book Critics Circle Award, and that same year saw the publication of his recording, Love Notes from the Madhouse. In 2000, Radicloni Clytus edited a book of Komunyakaa’s prose, Blue Notes: Essays, Interviews, and Commentaries, for the University of Michigan Press series. In an essay from that collection, “Control Is the Mainspring,” the poet writes,

I learned that the body and the mind are indeed connected: good writing is physical and mental. I welcomed the knowledge of this because I am from a working-class people who believe that physical labor is sacred and spiritual.

This combination of the realistic and the spiritual runs throughout Komunyakaa’s poems, whether they are about his
childhood, the father-son relationship, the spiritual journey each of us takes—alone, and in whatever circumstances life hands us—and the various conflicts of war. He has become an important poet for our times.

Bibliography

Carolyn Forché (b. 1950)

Contributing Editor: Constance Coiner

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Because two of the five poems included in this anthology appear in the section The Country Between Us (TCBU) titled “In Salvador, 1978–80,” students will need some introduction to the situation in El Salvador at the time when Forché went there as a journalist/poet/human rights investigator. My students have been curious about the U.S. role in El Salvador’s twelve-year civil war that ended with a United Nations (U.N.)-brokered peace accord on January 1, 1992. In “A Lesson in Commitment” (TriQuarterly [Winter 1986]: 30–38) Forché recounts the events that led to her going to El Salvador—an interesting, even amusing story that students will welcome. Forché’s “El Salvador: An Aide Mémoire” (The American Poetry Review [July/August 1981]: 3–7), which both prefaces and theoretically frames the “El Salvador” poems, is essential to students’ understanding “The Colonel” and “Because One Is Always Forgotten.”

Findings of the U.N.-sponsored “truth commission,” which investigated some of the worst human rights abuses of the twelve-year civil war, appear, for example, in The New York Times—“U.N. Report Urges Sweeping Changes in Salvador Army” (March 16, 1993, A1 and A12) and “How U.S. Actions Helped Hide Salvador Human Rights Abuses” (March 21, 1993, Section 1, pages 1 and 10). Consider also “The Military Web of Corruption,” The Nation (October 23, 1982, 391–03), by Forché and Leonel Gomez. Students could also profit from renting on their own or your showing clips from Romero, a 1989 film directed by John Duigan and featuring Raul Julia as Monsignor Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvador to whom Forché dedicated the eight “El Salvador poems.” (Romero was murdered by a death squad in 1980 while saying mass at a hospital for the terminally ill.)

Students and teachers who want more background on El Salvador’s history and the country’s political and economic conditions can consult the following: El Salvador: Another
Vietnam (1981), a fifty-minute documentary produced and directed by Glenn Silber and Tete Vasconcellos; Robert Armstrong and Janet Shenk’s El Salvador: The Face of Revolution (Boston: South End Press, 1982); A Decade of War: El Salvador Confronts the Future, eds. Anjli Sundaram and George Gelber (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991); and the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), an independent organization founded to analyze and report on Latin America and U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America. NACLA (475 Riverside Drive, Room 454, New York, NY 10115; 212-870-3146) publishes a journal and has a library open to the public.

I strongly recommend addressing the controversy in the U.S. concerning “political poetry,” perhaps at the beginning and then at the end of your discussion of Forché’s poems. Forché herself addresses this controversy briefly in “El Salvador: An Aide Mémoire.” Forché’s poetry and her views point to differences between formalist and “cultural studies” approaches to literature, differences that can also be usefully discussed in relation to other writers assigned in your course.

An audiocassette of Forché reading from TCBU is available from Watershed Tapes, P.O. Box 50145, Washington, D.C. 20004. Students respond favorably to hearing Forché read the poems. I also ask for volunteers to read the poems aloud. They have done so effectively, especially if given a few days to prepare.

“The Colonel”

Forché invented the term “documentary poem” for “The Colonel.” This alternative form works partly because she sparingly employs traditional poetic forms as touchstones within it and partly because its seeming “artlessness” elicits belief from her readers.

In the journalistic way that it sets the scene, “The Colonel” takes little poetic license, inviting readers to trust that it has not caricatured the truth. Its simple, declarative sentences do not resemble poetic lines. Even visually, with its justified right-hand margin, the piece resembles a newspaper report more than a poem. In the twentieth century, the lyric has become by far the dominant poetic form, but because Forché wants her readers to experience what she witnessed in El Salvador from 1978 to 1980, she consciously resists lyricizing.
the experience. Before turning to Forché’s poems, I define and provide examples of well-known lyrical poems so students can better understand how she subverts traditional lyrical poetry.

Forché first draws us into “The Colonel” by conversing with us about the rumors that have crept north of brutal Latin American military dictatorships: “WHAT YOU HAVE HEARD is true.” Forché extends that sense of familiarity for her reader by creating in the first lines a scene that, except for the pistol on the cushion, could occur in any North American home: The wife serves coffee, the daughter files her nails, the son goes out for the evening; there are daily papers, pet dogs, a TV turned on even at meal time. The minutiae of ordinary domestic life draw us into the scene, as if we’re entering the room with Forché; we feel as if we’re having dinner with the colonel.

“The moon swung bare on its black cord over the house” is one of two figures foregrounded in the poem, and Forché deliberately draws attention to its artfulness. Although the image is ominous, suggestive generally of the gothic and particularly of a swinging interrogation lamp or of someone hanging naked from a rope, it is too decorative for its place between a pistol and a cop show, thus announcing itself as art.

The following lines portray the colonel’s house as a fortress: “Broken bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps from a man’s legs or cut his hands to lace. On the windows there were gratings like those in liquor stores.” The outside of this fortress, constructed to mutilate anyone who tries to get inside, stands in stark contrast to the several images of “civilization” and affluence inside, such as “dinner, rack of lamb, good wine, a gold bell [that] was on the table for calling the maid.”

Until the parrot says hello from the terrace, triggering the colonel’s anger and the action of the poem—that is, his spilling human ears on the table—the poem is a string of the verbs “to be.” As passive as her verbs, the poet can only catalog nouns, unable to exercise control or take action. In fact, her friend warns her with his eyes: “say nothing.” And so, many readers identify with the poet rather than feel manipulated by her; like us, she is frightened, wary. (Students may be surprised to learn that Forché did not invent the Colonel’s displaying severed ears as a startling, violent metaphor. The incident actually occurred, she has reported.)

Note the contrast between the single stylized line, “the
There were daily papers . . .
On the television was a cop show. It was in English.
Broken bottles were embedded in the walls . . .
On the windows there were gratings like those in liquor stores.

This contrast between the stylized line and the weak-verb sentences suggests the range of possible responses to situations such as dinner with the colonel as well as the range of possible responses to reading about dinner with the colonel: Will the poet remain impotent, unable to invent strong verbs—in other words, be unable to take action? Do more appropriate responses exist? Forché thus puts her readers in her place, in that room with the colonel, in a state of nascent political and moral awareness. The form itself suggests that we must make choices and take positions, not only as we read “The Colonel” but also as we respond to military dictatorships and to our government’s support of them.

With the poem’s second foregrounded figure, a simile describing the ears as “dried peach halves,” the poet at once manipulates the mundane and is confined by it. She knows we have all seen dried fruit and so she could not more vividly describe those severed ears, but she apologizes for the limits of her inherited poetic and for the limits of language itself, acknowledging simply: “There is no other way to say this.” However, she also defends poetic language here. Because “there is no other way to say this,” she must rely on a poetic device, a simile, to communicate with us.

The colonel shakes one of the ears in the faces of his guests. A human ear is an unusual—an even extraordinary—metonymy, as Forché well knows. It stands for the Salvadoran people, for those who have been mutilated and murdered as well as for those who continue to resist the military dictatorship. It might be helpful to students to think of the colonel’s actions as a perverse magic show. He is able to make a severed ear come “alive” by dropping it into a glass of water, just as the death squads are able to make Salvadors disappear. The sweeping gesture (“He swept the ears to the floor with his arm and held the last of his wine in the air”) is...
theatrical and sends the ears down to the floor while the colonel elevates his glass of wine. The glass of wine carries us back to the “good wine” at dinner and the other markers of the affluent life maintained within the colonel’s fortress at the expense of the extreme poverty outside. The glass of wine, then, is a metonymy for all the trappings of “civilization” we have seen in the colonel’s fortress and for the power of the military over ordinary Salvadorans. And as the ears of ordinary Salvadorans go down to the floor, that wineglass, that metonymy for the affluence of the few, is hoisted triumphantly above them.

With this theatrical action come the colonel’s climactic words: “Something for your poetry, no?” Most immediately, “Something” refers to the grand theatrical show the colonel has put on for his guests’ “entertainment.” But the colonel’s ironic sneer also mocks Forché’s position as a North American poet, drawing attention to the belief held by many North Americans that poetry has certain “proper” subjects, and that mutilation—and by extension politics—are not among them. Since the eighteenth century, mainstream North America has lost touch with the sense of literature as political catalyst. Nineteenth-century romanticism and some twentieth-century poetry promoted by New Criticism has been especially individualized, introspective, and self-referential. In “A Lesson in Commitment” Forché recalls how Leonel Gomez Vides tried to persuade her to come to El Salvador, asking her, “Do you want to write poetry about yourself for the rest of your life?” Forché, who came to understand Gomez Vides’s point, believes that the “twentieth century human condition demands a poetry of witness” (“El Salvador: An Aide Mémoire”).

Now look at the poem’s final lines: “Some of the ears on the floor caught this scarp of his voice. Some of the / ears on the floor were pressed to the ground.” Some of the ears seem to be alive, even though the colonel didn’t believe for a minute during his mock magic show that he was actually bringing a dead ear back to life. Some of the ears seem to be listening and feeling for vibrations, for sounds and motion of resistance to the colonel’s fortress. This poem, especially these concluding lines, implicitly questions the reader: Is your ear pressed to the ground? Are you listening? Have you “HEARD” (to return to the poem’s opening words, written for emphasis in uppercase)? Are you responding to and involving yourself in resistance to the brutality of this colonel and others like him?
This poem makes an excellent pedagogical companion piece to “The Colonel.” As in her documentary poem, Forché writes in calculated relation to bourgeois forms, calling attention to the limits of inherited poetic forms and at the same time insisting that poetry can be used for political as well as aesthetic purposes. The obverse of “The Colonel,” which appears artless, this elegy is the most highly structured piece in TCBU. Before turning to “Because One Is Always Forgotten,” I define the elegy and provide examples of well-known elegies.

Forché wrote “Because One Is Always Forgotten” in memory of José Rudolfo Viera, who was Salvador’s Deputy of Agrarian Reform under President Napoleon Duarte. (If teachers have read aloud excerpts from “A Lesson in Commitment” or made copies available, students will recall that Leonel Gomez Vides visited Forché in San Diego, urging her to come to El Salvador; Gomez Vides was Viera’s assistant Deputy for Agrarian Reform.) Viera discovered that money that had been designated for agrarian reform (that is, an attempt to divide some of the largest landholdings so that most of the country’s wealth would no longer reside in the hands of a few families) was being pocketed by members of Duarte’s administration and men high up in the military. Some of that money was coming from the Carter administration in the U.S., from U.S. taxpayers, and going not toward agrarian reform but to support the expensive tastes of a few. Think for a moment of words from “The Colonel”—rack of lamb, good wine, a gold bell for calling the maid. Think for a moment, too, of Forché’s words in “El Salvador: An Aide Mémoire”: “I was taken to the homes of landowners, with their pools set like aquamarines in the clipped grass, to the afternoon games of canasta over quaint local pupusas and tea, where parrots hung by their feet among the bougainvillea and nearly everything was imported, if only from Miami or New Orleans.”

Viera, who reported the corruption on news televised in San Salvador, was murdered by “the White Glove,” a right-wing death squad. Viera was shot along with two North Americans, Michael Hammer and Mark Pearlman, who were in El Salvador as consultants for agrarian reform. At the time of the murders, the three men were having a meal in the Sheraton Hotel dining room in San Salvador. No one was arrested, much less brought to trial, for the murder of the three...
men. Some North American newspapers reported the deaths of Michael Hammer and Mark Pearlman, but because Viera’s death was not included in those reports, Forché felt the need to memorialize Viera.

“Because One Is Always Forgotten” tightly compresses rhythm and images, suggesting that traditional forms necessarily strain or snap under the weight of political imprisonment, murder, mutilation. After the second line, the lines start “losing” beats, as if atrocities in Salvador defy even one more word or beat. Forché undercuts the stylization that would comfort us, that would provide the consolation and closure that elegies have traditionally provided.

She also uses “heart,” a word common in poetry, in a way that is the opposite of what we expect.

I could take my heart, he said, and give it to a campesino

and he would cut it up and give it back:

you can’t eat heart in those four dark chambers where a man can be kept years.

“You can’t eat heart” is a spondee—all unaccented syllables have been removed. A spondee represents language at its most compressed, its most structured, because English is more naturally a combination of accented and unaccented syllables. “You can’t eat heart” also announces the limitations of poetic language. You can’t eat it. It cannot, literally, sustain human life. In other words, an elegy, however necessary, is not a sufficient response to events such as those in El Salvador.

Students may volunteer that “those four dark chambers” refer to the left and right ventricles and the left and right auricles of the heart. But unless they have read “The Visitor,” one of Forché’s “El Salvador” poems not included in The Heath Anthology, they won’t know that “dark chambers” also refers to “la oscura” (the dark place), a prison within a prison that inspired “The Visitor.” Forché describes “la oscura”—where men were kept in boxes, one meter by one meter, with barred openings the size of a book—in her introduction to “The Visitor” on the Watershed audiocassette; she also describes “la oscura” in “El Salvador: An Aide Mémoire.”

Now look at the following lines from the fourth stanza:
A boy soldier in the bone-hot sun works his knife
to peel the face from a dead man

The second line of this stanza stops abruptly; again, it is as if the atrocities in Salvador defy even one more word or beat. “To peel the face from a dead man” is no more an invented metaphor than “The Colonel”’s severed ears; in Salvador Forché actually saw human faces hanging from tree branches. Too often we have been taught to expect hearts and flowers from poetry, sometimes used sentimentally, but such sentimentality is turned on its head here. “Flowering with such faces” uses conventional poetic language in an extraordinary way.

Ask students what they make of the last, paradoxical stanza: “The heart is the toughest part of the body / Tenderness is in the hands.” This stanza asks readers to examine something we have long accepted, the cliché of the tender heart, implying that we should probe some of our other assumptions as well.

Hands can do something; they can take action. TCBU includes many other references to hands, suggesting a wide range of possibilities for their use. Hands can “peel the face from a dead man / and hang it from the branch of a tree.” The colonel uses his hands to spill human ears on the table and to shake one of the ears mockingly at his guests. Hands can be the White Glove (the name for a notorious Salvadoran death squad). But hands can also be tender; hands can connect people (the poet and Victoria in “As Children Together” hold “each other’s coat sleeves”); hands can communicate (Forché tells Victoria to write to her). Rather than provide consolation and closure, as would a traditional elegy, “Because One Is Always Forgotten,” like “The Colonel” and other poems TCBU, asks readers to consider choices about their hands, their actions, their lives.

“As Children Together”

This poem is included in the section of TCBU titled “Reunion.” Addressed to Forché’s girlhood friend, Victoria, this poem gives us a sense of the poet’s working-class roots. Although Forché continues to identify strongly with the class of her origin and with other oppressed groups, even as a youngster she “always believed . . . that there might be a way
to get out” of Detroit. Victoria, ashamed of the “tins of surplus flour,” the “relief checks,” and other trappings of poverty, was also eager to escape: “I am going to have it,” Victoria asserted, while believing that granting sexual favors to men was her only conduit.

The first stanza represents the girls’ lives and futures as boxed in, closed off: the snow is “pinned”; the lights are “cubed”; they wait for Victoria’s father to “whittle his soap cakes away, finish the whiskey,” and for Victoria’s mother to turn off the lights. Confined by “tight black dresses”—which, in this context, arguably represent a class marker—they nevertheless attempt to move away from the limitations of class, “holding each other’s coat sleeves” for support. They slide “down the roads . . . past / crystal swamps and the death / face of each dark house, / over the golden ice / of tobacco spit” (my emphasis). They try to move away from their diminished options—the “quiet of ponds,” “the blind white hills,” “a scant snow” (my emphasis). But, sliding on ice, their movement is literally as well as metaphorically precarious.

Like “The Colonel” and “Because One Is Always Forgotten,” this is a documentary poem, if less apparently so. The poet reports to Victoria and to us the poet’s memory of their life together as children, the little she has heard about Victoria since their childhood, and one major event in the poet’s life since her childhood (“I have been to Paris / since we parted”). In this stanza we hear the voice of the reporter, as we do in the other two poems. Although the poet doesn’t know Victoria’s current state, she reports what “They say.”

If what “they say” is true, and if Victoria reads this poem, the poet has two simple messages for her childhood friend: “write to me” and “I have been to Paris / since we parted.” On first reading, many students may think that the poet is bragging about the contrast between her own adult life and what she believes that of Victoria to be (the poet has been to Paris, while Victoria did not even get as far as Montreal, the city of her childhood dreams). However, by taking the last line in the context of the entire poem, we see the implications, not of going to Paris, but how the poet got there: not by relying on the men of this poem as her vehicle. “Write to me” suggests that the poet wants to share with Victoria her experiences of—and perhaps her strategies for—getting out.

Victoria has not escaped the cycle of poverty and battered men. In the second-to-last stanza the poet reports a
rumor that Victoria lives in a trailer near Detroit with her children and with her husband, who “returned from the Far East broken / cursing holy blood at the table” and whose whittling of soap cakes associates him with Victoria’s whiskey-drinking father, who appears in the first stanza.

At first glance, “As Children Together” seems far removed from Salvador’s civil war. In the context of TCBU, however, “As Children Together” links “the Far East” (Vietnam) to El Salvador. Young men from Forché’s working-class neighborhood were drafted by or enlisted in the military when many of the more privileged of their generation managed student deferments or, after the draft lottery was established, other alternatives to military service. In “A Lesson in Commitment,” Forché reports that her interest in Vietnam was fueled partly by her first husband’s fighting in Vietnam and his suffering “from what they now call Post-Vietnam Syndrome.” The Vietnam War, as well as her opposition to it, schooled Forché for “another Vietnam” in El Salvador.

“As Children Together” provides a good opportunity to discuss the range of meanings for the deliberately ambiguous title of The Country Between Us. “Between” can mean something that separates and distances people, but “between” can also mean that which we share, that which connects us. The “country” is El Salvador, but it is also the United States. “Us” can be people on opposing sides of a civil war, people polarized by their opinions about political issues, or people sharing a common opposition to oppression. “Us” can be people inhabiting two nations (Salvador and the U.S.). “Us” can also refer to two individuals, such as the poet and Victoria, who may be at once separated by geography and recent experience but connected by common roots and class origin. The poet’s saying to Victoria “write to me” suggests a desire for “between” as separation to become the “between” of reunion and connection.

From “The Recording Angel” and “Elegy”

(Note: Constance Coiner, who wrote this perceptive and sensitive entry on teaching Forché’s poetry, died tragically just before the appearance of the third edition of the Instructor’s Guide. The following suggestions for teaching the newly added poems by Forché are by the editor of the Instructor’s Guide, and while they cannot match the fullness and expertise copyright © Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.)
of Constance’s work, I hope they share in its spirit.) Both the excerpt from “The Recording Angel” and “Elegy” are from Forché’s recent collection of poems, *The Angel of History*. As the title of the collection suggests, the work is not so much based on personal experience in the ways of poems of witness and remembrance such as “Because One Is Always Forgotten” and “As Children Together,” but is instead a meditation on history, specifically, the nightmare history of the twentieth century, from the Holocaust and Hiroshima to the tragedy of El Salvador. In her Notes at the end of *The Angel of History*, Forché says that “these utterances issue from my own encounter with the events of this century but do not represent ‘it.’ The first-person, free-verse, lyric-narrative of my earlier years has given way to a work which has desired its own bodying forth: polyphonic, broken, haunted, and in ruins, with no possibility of restoration.” These comments speak to the potential difficulty of these later poems to students, but by explaining some of the rationale behind the composition of these poems, they also can help students make their own sense of Forché’s style. Writing in response to the horror of the Second World War in these two poems, Forché resists the aesthetic impulse to make whole that which has been shattered by war and genocide. Instead, the class can take Forché’s description of this history as “polyphonic, broken” and “haunted” as a way of reading Forché’s poems not as attempts to obscure history but as parts of her commitment to honesty and even realism. Rather than “explaining” the war or the Holocaust, and thereby running the risk of substituting her voice for the voice of the victims and those who resisted, or even of explaining away the past, Forché instead remains true to the ethic of witnessing by presenting us with shards from a past “in ruins,” both in terms of descriptions and physical places and quotations from various sources. (The Notes at the end of *The Angel of History* provide some helpful references for these quotations.) As a result, we retain as readers the moral responsibility to confront the horror of twentieth-century history and craft our own response, without the safety net of received opinion or the comfort of conventional aesthetic unity.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**
2. The difference between poetry that calls attention chiefly to form, and poetry like Forché’s that is formally interesting as well as socially and politically engaged.
3. The difference between poetry that is individualized and self-referential and poetry like Forché’s that addresses social and political issues and engenders human empathy.
4. *TCBU* has renewed the controversy about the relation of art to politics, about “suitable” subjects for poetry. This peculiarly American debate assumes that only certain poems are political, stigmatizing “political” poems and failing to acknowledge the ideological constitution of all literary texts. The opposition to “political” poetry, as Forché herself has observed, extends beyond explicitly polemical work to any “impassioned voices of witness,” to any who leave the “safety of self-contemplation to imagine and address the larger world” (“A Lesson in Commitment”).
5. Forché’s poetry resonates with a sense of international kinship. “For us to comprehend El Salvador,” Forché has written, “for there to be moral revulsion, we must be convinced that Salvadorans—and indeed the whole population of Latin America—are people like ourselves, contemporary with ourselves, and occupying the same reality” (“Grasping the Gruesome,” *Esquire*, September 1983). Forché’s poetry moves us with a forceful sense of “the other” rare in contemporary American verse.
6. The merging of personal and political.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

In the twentieth century, the lyric became the preponderant poetic form, but in *TCBU* Forché is a storyteller, her poetry predominantly narrative. Because she wants her readers to experience what she witnessed in El Salvador from 1978 to 1980, she consciously resists lyricizing experiences. Forché has said that “the twentieth-century human condition demands a poetry of witness” (“El Salvador: An Aide Mémoire”).

To show how Forché departs from the lyric, teachers should define the lyric and provide well-known examples. To
show how Forché departs from the elegy in “Because One Is Always Forgotten,” teachers should define the elegy and provide known examples. For “The Colonel” teachers should define and provide other examples of “metonymy.”

Original Audience

The particular audience for Forché’s poetry is the American people. Monsignor Romero (again, the Archbishop of San Salvador who was assassinated by a right-wing death squad while praying at mass) urged Forché to return to the U.S. and “tell the American people what is happening” (“El Salvador: An Aide Mémoire”). Poets do not often so purposefully address such a wide audience.

Students should discuss whether—and, if so, in what ways—forché’s poems effectively address the wide popular audience she seeks, one that would include more people than the “already converted.” Do the three poems under consideration avoid or fall into off-putting didacticism? Students, of course, will have their own responses, but I would argue that Forché has consciously adopted strategies throughout TCBU that invite the reader into the poems. One of those strategies is to acknowledge her own ignorance rather than point to the reader’s; another is to place herself or someone else in the poem as an object of ridicule or admonition rather than the reader. For example, the colonel sneers at the poet; the poet does not upbraid her reader. And in “Because One Is Always Forgotten,” a hungry campesino would reject Viera’s heart, admonishing: “you can’t eat heart.”

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Denise Levertov, Muriel Rukeyser, Adrienne Rich, Pablo Neruda—these are anti-imperialist, politically engaged writers whose lives and literary texts promote a global as well as a private kinship.

The private anguish of Sylvia Plath’s, Anne Sexton’s, and Robert Lowell’s confessional poetry provides a provocative contrast to the public issues of human rights violations, U.S. foreign policy, war, and class oppression addressed in “The Colonel,” “Because One Is Always Forgotten,” “Because One Is Always Forgotten,” "Just Before Morning," and "The Colonel."
Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

“The Colonel”:

1. How does the capitalization of the first four words function in the poem?
2. Can anyone identify the traditional poetic forms that Forché sparingly employs as “aesthetic centerpieces” in this “artless,” “journalistic,” documentary poem? (I’m thinking here of “the moon swung bare on its black cord over the house” and the simile describing the ears as “dried peach halves”).
3. Why is the television “cop show” in English, the commercial in Spanish?
4. Why the proliferation of to-be verbs (is, was, were)?
5. What are the women in this poem doing?
6. What might the colonel have in mind when he says, “Something for your poetry, no?”
7. What are the implied and explicit cultural and political relationships between Salvador and the U.S.?

“Because One Is Always Forgotten”:

1. In the first line, what does “it” refer to?
2. What are the relationships between “heart” and other body parts?
3. Who is “you” in the third stanza?
4. Identify similarities/differences (including formal ones) between this poem and “The Colonel.”
5. This poem concludes the section TCBU titled “In Salvador, 1978–80.” Why might have Forché chosen “hands” as the last word of this section?

“As Children Together”:

1. What are some of the similarities/differences between Victoria and the poet as children? What might be some similarities/differences between them as adults?
2. What is the significance of “Paris” in the last line?
3. What are some of the difficulties of remaining in touch
with one’s community, cultural group, or class of origin after being separated from them by emigration, formal education, or class mobility?

4. What’s the difference between the poet’s saying, “I always believed this./Victoria, that there might / be a way to get out” and Victoria’s asserting, “I am going to have it”?

5. Identify similarities/differences (including formal ones) between this poem and “The Colonel” and “Because One Is Always Forgotten.”

“The Recording Angel”:

1. How does Forché’s description of these poems as “polyphonic, broken, haunted, and in ruins, with no possibility of restoration” affect our understanding of their structure?

2. What is the effect of the juxtaposition of images of both peace and terror, such as the wings of doves with “a comic wedding in which corpses exchange vows”? What other such contrasts can be found, and what is their effect?

3. In Section I, the city seems deserted in the aftermath of some great calamity. Which images do you seize on to make sense of what has happened?

4. As we move into sections II and III, we encounter a child (referred to only as “it”) and a woman in a photograph. What clues (such as the ominous image of “the fresh claw of a swastika on Rue Boulard”) does the poem provide as to who these people are (or even if they are the same person) and what happened to them?

“Elegy”:

1. The quoted material in the poem is from descriptions of concentration camps in Claude Lanzmann’s 1985 film about the Holocaust, Shoah. What is the affect of such prosaic, almost matter-of-fact descriptions of the brutality of the Holocaust?

2. “And so we revolt against silence with a bit of speaking” can suggest the difficulty, almost impossibility, of finding adequate expression for the horror of the Holocaust. How would you describe the strategy that
“Elegy” uses and its effectiveness?

3. Who is the ghost figure in the poem? What kind of witness does he provide?

4. Notice the simultaneously beautiful and ominous image of the “tattoo of stars,” both suggesting the delicacy of the night sky but also reminding us of the ID numbers tattooed on the arms of concentration camp inmates. How does such imagery work as part of the “bit of speaking” against the silence of the aftermath of the Holocaust? What other examples of such imagery can you find?

Approaches to Writing

Students in my undergraduate courses write one-page (double-spaced, typed) “response” essays to each assigned text, which they turn in before I have said anything about the writer of text(s). In these essays, students reflect on why they have responded to the text(s) as they have, including some identification of their own subject position (gender, race, national origin, class origin, political views, and so on), but they must also refer specifically to the text. In the case of these five poems, students could choose to focus the response essay on just one poem or they could write about a recurring theme, image, and strategy, briefly citing all five poems.

A few students have elected to write creative responses, trying their hand at imitating the form of one of the assigned poems.

Bibliography


**Tomás Rivera (1935–1984)**

*Contributing Editor: Ramón Saldívar*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

Rivera’s novel is written in nonsequential chronology, with a multiplicity of characters, without an easily identifiable continuous narrator, and without a strictly casual narrative logic. While each of the selections is coherent within itself, students will need to be prepared for the apparent lack of continuity from one section of work to the next.

I begin with a careful discussion of the first selection, “The Lost Year,” to show that there is, at least in sketchy form, the beginnings of a narrative identity present. As in other modernist and postmodernist writings, in William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and *Go Down, Moses*, for example, or in Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*, the narrative is not expository, attempting to give us historical depiction. It offers instead complex subjective impressions and psychological portraiture. Students should be asked to read the first selection looking for ways in which the narrative does cohere. Ask: Who speaks? Where is the speaker? What does the speaker learn about him-
or herself here, even if only minimally? As students proceed to the following selections, it is appropriate to ask what this unconventional narrative form has to do with the themes of the work.

Rivera’s work is openly critical of and in opposition to mainstream American culture. What does it accomplish by being oppositional? What does it share with other “marginal” literatures, such as African-American, feminist, gay and lesbian, or third world writings? Instead of attempting to locate Rivera within American or modernist writings, it might be useful to think of Rivera’s place within the group of other noncanonic, antitraditional, engaged writings.

Students are sometimes misled by the apparent simplicity of the first selection: They might need to be carefully alerted to the question of identity being posed there. Also, the historical context of racial violence and political struggle may need to be constructed for students: They may want to see these stories as exclusively about the plight of individuals when in reality Rivera is using individual characters as types for a whole community.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

*General Themes:* The coming to maturity of a young child as he begins to get a glimmer of the profound mystery of the adult world. The child, apparently a boy, raises in the second selection the traditional *lehresjahre* themes, having to do with the disillusionment of childhood dreams.

*Specific Themes:* This coming to maturity and the posing of universal existential questions (Who am I? Where do I belong?) take place within the specific historical and social context of the working-class life and political struggle of the Mexican-American migrant farmworker of the late 1940s and 1950s in Texas.

Universal themes are thus localized to a very high degree. What does this localizing of universal themes accomplish in the novel? Also, the question of personal identity is in each of the three selections increasingly tied to the identity of the community (*la raza*). The stories thus also thematize the relationship between private history and public history.

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Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Questions of style are intimately involved with questions of substance in these selections. Rivera claims to have been influenced by his reading in James Joyce, Marcel Proust, William Faulkner, and the great Latin American novelists. Rivera also acknowledged that he had been profoundly influenced by the work of the great Mexican-American anthropologist and folklorist Américo Paredes, whose ethnographic work realistically pictured turn-of-the-century life in the Southwest. Why does this work about the “local” theme of life in the American Southwest offer itself in the form of high modernism? Would not a more straightforward social realism have been more appropriate for the themes it presents?

Original Audience

The work was originally written in Spanish, using the colloquial, everyday cadences of working-class Spanish-speaking people. Bilingual instructors should review the original text and try to point out to students that the English translations are but approximations of a decidedly oral rhythm. Written at the height of the Chicano political movement and in the midst of an often bitter labor struggle, at times Rivera’s work bristles with anger and outrage. The turmoil of the late 1960s and early 1970s plays a large role in the tone of the work.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Rivera claimed to have been influenced by many modern authors, Faulkner chief among them. A useful discussion of the relationships between form and theme might arise by comparing Rivera’s work with Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying or Absalom, Absalom! What does narrative experimentation have to do with social realism? Why does an author choose nontraditional narrative techniques? What does one gain by
Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. Many of the questions posed by this study guide might be fruitfully addressed to students before they read Rivera’s work. Especially useful are those questions that ask students to think about the relationship between form/content and that take into account the historical/political circumstances of the period during which these stories were written.

2. Students might consider in the piece entitled “And the Earth Did Not Devour Him”: Why does the earth not devour him? What does the narrator learn and why does this knowledge seem so momentous? Concerning the last selection, “When We Arrive,” students might discuss the journey motif: Where are these migrant workers going? What will they find at the end of the road?
Bibliography


Nicholasa Mohr (b. 1938)

*Contributing Editor: Frances R. Aparicio*

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Mohr’s writings are quite accessible for the college-age student population. There is no bilingualism, her English is quite simple and direct, and her stories in general do not create difficulties in reading or comprehension.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

1. The universal theme of “growing up” (bildungsroman), and in her case in particular, growing up female in El Barrio.
2. The theme of the family; views of the Hispanic family and the expectations it holds of its members, in contrast to its Anglo-American counterpart.
3. Sexual roles in Latino culture; traditional versus free vocations (for men).
4. Mother/daughter relationships; tensions, generational differences.
5. Women’s issues such as career versus family, the economic survival of welfare mothers, dependency and independence issues.
6. Outside views of the barrio “ghetto” in relation to the
Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

The autobiographical form is quite predominant in Mohr’s writings, as is James Clifford’s concept of “ethnobiography,” in which the self is seen in conjunction with his or her ethnic community. And Mohr employs traditional storytelling, simple, direct, accessible, chronological use of time, and a logical structure.

Very dynamic discussions emerge when students are asked to evaluate Mohr’s transparent, realist style as good literature or not. This discussion should include observations of how many U.S. Latino and Latina writers have opted for a less academic and so-called “sophisticated” style that would allow for wider audiences outside the academic world.

Original Audience

It is important to read many of Mohr’s works as literature for young adolescents. This explains and justifies the simplicity and directness of her style.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Fruitful comparisons could be made if we look at other Latina women who also write on “growing up female and Hispanic in the United States”: Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1983); *Cuentos by Latinas*, eds. Alma Gómez, Cherríe Moraga, and Mariana Romo-Carmona (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983); and Helena Maria Viramontes’s *The Moths and Other Stories* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1985). Viramontes’s stories promise fruitful comparisons with Mohr’s *Ritual of Survival*.

In addition, Mohr has been contrasted to Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets*, another autobiographical book in which El Barrio is presented in terms of drugs, gangs, and violence. I would propose a comparison to Eduard Rivera’s
*Family Instalments* as yet another example of ethnobiography. Finally, interesting contrasts and parallelisms may be drawn from looking at North American women writers such as Ann Beattie and the Canadian Margaret Atwood; while class and race perspectives might differ, female and feminist issues could be explored as common themes.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

1. Study questions; Specific questions on text, characters, plot, endings, issues raised. More major themes could also be explored such as: How do we define epic characters, history, and great literature? Where would Mohr’s characters fit within the traditional paradigms?

2. Writing assignment: Students may write their own autobiography; experiment with first- and third-person narratives; contrast female students’ writings with male students’.

   Paper topics: (a) Discuss the role of women within family and society in Mohr’s stories; (b) discuss Mohr as a feminine or feminist writer; (c) analyze the Hispanic cultural background to her stories vis-à-vis the universal themes.

**Bibliography**

Not much has been written on Nicholasa Mohr’s work per se. The following are good introductory articles, and the Rivero article is particularly good for the study of bildungsroman in Latina women’s writings:


Classroom Issues and Strategies

The ethnic background of the students will greatly determine the nature of class discussion. How sympathetic they are to Mora’s position will vary. Students may be first generation immigrants who themselves are adapting to English and U.S. culture, or second- or third-generation residents whose relatives are the living reminders of the process. Others may see it as an experience their ancestors went through years ago, while some will never have asked themselves if their ancestors ever spoke anything but English. You may find yourself in the middle of a heated discussion of English as the official national language or the threat to American culture that the use of other languages represents for many people. I prefer to guide the discussion toward the universal quality of the experience of acculturation the poems express.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

The Mora selections feature the theme of English language acquisition as a painful experience of conflict and suffering for native Spanish speakers. In each poem, school is at least
partially the setting for the conflict. Her perspective characterizes the experience as one of gain and loss, emphasizing the latter as the loss of cultural authenticity, while the value of the gain is left in doubt. This position is common among proponents of bilingual education and ethnic pluralism, and can be found among the majority of writers from the Chicano communities. It reflects a turn away from the historical paradigm of U.S. culture as English-based that in turn made the learning of English a necessary rite of passage. However, it should be noted that each poem includes a touch of ambivalence: The characters are attracted to English-based culture, producing a desire whose satisfaction they seek.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Mora’s form and style are direct and should present few problems for students. The most notable feature is the use of Spanish words, but she does so on the most basic level that requires only dictionary translating for understanding. One should note, however, that the girl’s name, “Esperanza,” in “Border Town,” means hope—an obvious pun.

**Original Audience**

Mora tends to publish in small presses specializing in distribution to a Latino readership. Hence, her poetry can count on a mostly sympathetic audience, one that probably will not find the smattering of Spanish hinders comprehension.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

Mora can be placed in the context of Bernice Zamora and Lorna Dee Cervantes, among Chicana writers included here, as well as Judith Ortiz Cofer. For a similar depiction of the situation faced by Chicanos in Texas schools, see Tomás Rivera’s *And the Earth Did Not Part*; for the ambivalent attitude of desire and fear, see Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger of Memory*; for a contrasting view on the question of English language acquisition, see Linda Chavez’s *Out of the Barrio.*
Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. Students can be asked to locate the verses in each poem in which the dilemma of attraction and repulsion are conveyed. Ask them to consider the pros and cons of acculturation, especially as it relates to education.
2. Have students write about their own experience and, specifically, about whether education has demanded of them anything similar to what Mora describes. They could consider the question of private versus public codes of discourse and if education can serve both.

Víctor Hernández Cruz (b. 1949)

Contributing Editor: Frances R. Aparicio

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Cruz’s poetry may seem hermetic at times, and partly this is due to the use of imagery, words, and references that originate in Hispanic culture or mythology. Also, his poetry demands a reader who is familiar with both English and Spanish since he frequently plays with both languages.

I would advise students to read carefully and aid them by preparing a glossary or handout that would clarify the difficult references. (The problem is that not all English teachers have access to the meaning of local references to Puerto Rican towns, Indian gods, mythological figures.)

I would emphasize the importance of the concrete poetry movement in relation to Cruz’s work. The importance of the collage text, the use of space, the page, the graphics, and the significance of play as integral elements in the reading of a poem, could be clearly explained by a visual presentation of concrete poems from Brazil, Europe, and the United States.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal
Issues

Urban life; meaning of language as an identity construct; importance of the cultural and historical past and how it flows into the present; importance of music and drugs as a basis for the poet’s images; Hispanic culture and identity: How is it reaffirmed through literary creation?

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Focus on the importance of collage or hybrid texts; influence of concrete poetry; linguistic mixtures and lucid bilingualism; concept of metaliterary texts; contemporary American poetry: free verse, fragmentation, minimalism, surrealism.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Compare and contrast with Allen Ginsberg and other poets of the beat generation (use of imagery based on drugs, music of the ’60s, influence of surrealism and irreverent language); an additional comparison to e. e. cummings, as well as to the concrete poets, would be helpful in terms of use of space, punctuation, and the page as signifiers. Contrast with poets like Pedro Pietri and Tato Laviera, in which the elements of popular culture are central to the understanding of their works (Cruz is much more introspective and abstract, and does not fit totally into the paradigm of Nuyorican aesthetics).

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

Study questions will focus mostly on the assigned text and would require students to identify major theme, use of language and imagery, and aesthetic effect of each poem. Paper topics would focus on major themes. For example:

1. Discuss how “Speech changing within space,” the epigraph to By Lingual Wholes, encapsulates Victor Hernández Cruz’s poetics.
2. Would you agree that English is transformed or affected
3. Discuss the presence of Hispanic culture within contemporary, urban life in the United States as it is reflected in Cruz’s literature; that is, how he tropicalizes the U.S. cultural identity.

4. Analyze Cruz’s texts as an example of urban literature: How do his point of view, attitudes, imagery, and rhythms create a sense of life in American cities?

5. Write on Cruz’s use of music and drugs as basis for his poetic imagery.
Bibliography


Garrett Kaoru Hongo (b. 1951)

*Contributing Editors: Amy Ling and King-Kok Cheung*

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Explain that Hongo’s themes and craft are evident even in the small selection we have in this text. The title poem of his first book, *Yellow Light*, emphasizes the centrality of the Asian perspective by ascribing a positive, fertile quality to the color commonly designating Asian skin and formerly meaning “cowardly.” By focusing his sights on ordinary people in the midst of their daily rounds, as in “Yellow Light,” “Off from Swing Shift,” and “And Your Soul Shall Dance,” by describing their surroundings in precise detail, by suggesting their dreams, Hongo depicts both the specificities of the Japanese-American experience and its universality. “And Your Soul Shall Dance” is a tribute to playwright and fiction writer Wakako Yamauchi.
Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

The work of any Asian-American writer is best understood in the context of the black civil rights and the women’s liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. These movements by African Americans and women led Asian Americans to join in the push for change. Asian Americans as a group had endured racial discrimination in the U.S. for over a century, from the harassment of Chinese in the California gold mines to the internment of thousands of Japanese Americans during World War II. Furthermore, the last three wars the United States has engaged in have been fought in Asia, a fact that further consolidated a sense of community among the hitherto disparate Asian groups in this country.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

In Hongo’s volume *Yellow Light*, we no longer find a dependence on language and rhythm borrowed from African-American culture nor strident screams of bitterness and anger characteristic of polemic Asian-American poetry, the dominant mode and tone of the 1970s. Hongo is at home in his skin, positive about his background and the people around him, confident in his own voice, concerned as much with his craft as with his message.

Hongo’s poems paint portraits of the people around him, and he invests his people with dignity and bathes them in love. Pride in an Asian-American heritage shines through in the catalog of foods in “Who Among You Knows the Essence of Garlic?” Hongo’s eye has the precision of seventeenth-century Flemish still-life painters, but his art is dynamic and evokes the sounds, smells, and tastes of the foods he describes.

He has combined the consciousness of the late twentieth-century ethnic nationalist with the early twentieth-century imagist’s concern for the most precise, the most resonant image, and added to this combination his own largeness of spirit.
Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

The examples of Lawson Inada and Frank Chin excited Garrett Hongo, who was encouraged by their work to do his own.

Frank Chin displayed his artistic and verbal talent, making his claim for a place in American history and expressing his deep ambivalence about Chinese Americans in his plays. “Chickencoop Chinaman” was a dazzling display of verbal pyrotechnics but underlying the surface razzle-dazzle is a passionate throbbing of anger and pain for the emasculation of Chinese men in the United States.

Lawson Fusao Inada was another visible and vocal model for younger Asian-American writers. His book of poetry Before the War provided a range of models and styles from lyrical musings, to sublimated anger from a Japanese-American perspective, to colloquial outbursts inspired by black jazz and rhythms.

Hongo acknowledges other models and mentors as well: Bert Meyers, Donald Hall, C. K. Williams, Charles Wright, and Philip Levine.

Bibliography


Michael S. Harper (b. 1938)

Contributing Editor: Herman Beavers

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Harper’s poems often prove difficult because he is so deft at merging personal and national history within the space of one metaphor. One must be aware, then, of Harper’s propensity toward veiled references to historical events. One can think here of a series of poems like “History as Apple Tree.” The result, in a series like this, is that the reader cannot follow the large number of historical references Harper makes—in this case, to the history of Rhode Island and its founder, Roger Williams. The poems can be seen as obscure or enigmatic, when, in fact, they are designed to highlight a mode of African-American performance. In the same manner that one finds jazz musicians “quoting” another song within the space of a solo, Harper’s use of history is often designed to suggest the simultaneity of events, the fact that one cannot escape the presence of the past.

Harper’s interviews are often helpful, particularly those interviews where he discusses his poetic technique. Harper is a storyteller, a performer. He is adept at the conveyance of nuance in the poems. A valuable strategy is teaching Harper’s poems in conjunction with a brief introduction to modern jazz. Team teaching with a jazz historian or an ethnomusicologist while focusing on Harper’s strategies of composition is a way to ground the student in Harper’s use of jazz as a structuring technique in his poems. Moreover, it allows for dialogue between literary and musical worlds. Since Harper’s poems are often about both music and the context out of which the music springs, such a dialogue is important for students to see. As far as history is concerned, pointing the student toward, for example, a history of the Civil War or a biography of John Brown will often illuminate Harper’s propensity to “name drop” in his poems. What becomes clear is that Harper is not being dense, but rather he sees his poetic project as one of “putting the reader to work.”

You might introduce Harper by showing the film Birth of a Nation in order to flesh out Harper’s revisionary stance toward myth. Using the film as a kind of countermilieu, one can point out that Harper’s poetry is designed to create a renewed, more vital American mythos. Also, listening to John Coltrane’s A Love Supreme album will prove invaluable to understanding Harper’s jazz poems.

Students often protest the inaccessibility of the poems:
for example, “I don’t understand this poem at all!” There are often questions regarding Harper’s use of the word “modality.” Also they do not understand Harper’s use of repetition, which is designed to evoke the chant, or the poem as song.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Harper is very concerned in his poems with the “American tradition of forgetfulness.” In his poetry, one finds him creating situations where the contradictions between oral and written versions of history are brought into focus. Because Harper thinks of poetry as a discourse of song, the poems utilize improvisation to convey their themes. The intent of this is to highlight the complexity of American identity.

Harper’s personal issues are, further, not necessarily distinguishable from the historical in his poems. If one were to point to a set of events that spur Harper’s poetic voice, it would be the deaths of two of his children shortly after birth. Harper’s poems on the subject express not only the personal grief of his wife and himself, but also the loss of cultural possibility the children represent. As a black man in a country so hostile to those who are black, Harper’s grief is conflated into rage at the waste of human potential, a result of American forms of amnesia.

In short, the historical and the personal often function in layered fashion. Thus, Harper may use his personal grief as the springboard for illuminating a history of atrocities; the source of grief is different, but the grief is no less real.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

While Harper does not write in “forms” (at least of the classical sort), his work is informed by jazz composition and also several examples of African-American modernism. Clearly, Sterling Brown, Ralph Ellison, and Robert Hayden have each had an impact on Harper’s poetry, not only formally, but also in terms of the questions Harper takes up in his poems. I would also cite W. H. Auden and W. B. Yeats as influences.
Formally and stylistically, Harper’s poetry derives from jazz improvisation. For example, in one of his poems on the jazz saxophonist John Coltrane, Harper works out a poem that doubles as a prayer-chant in Coltrane’s memory. What this suggests is that Harper does not favor symmetricality for the mere sake of symmetricality; thus, he eschews forms like the sonnet or the villanelle. One does find Harper, however, using prosody to usher the reader into a rhythmic mode that captures the nature of poetry as song as opposed to written discourse.

Original Audience

Harper’s poems have indeed been widely read. However, his work has undergone a shift in audience. When he came on the scene in the late sixties, the black arts movement produced a large amount of poetry, largely because of poetry’s supposed immediacy of impact. For that reason, I believe Harper’s work was read by a number of people who expected militancy, anger, and a very narrow subject matter. However, one can see that his work has a different stylistic quality than that of many of his contemporaries who claimed to be writing for a narrower audience. Harper’s poetry is more oriented toward inclusiveness; thus his poems utilize American history as a poetic site rather than just relying on a reified notion of racial identity that is crystallized into myth. Thus, after the sixties, Harper’s audience became more clearly located in the poetry establishment. Though he still writes about musicians and artists, his readership is more specialized, more focused on poetry than twenty years ago.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Compare Harper with Brown, Ellison, Auden, and Yeats, as well as James Wright, Philip Levine, and Seamus Heaney. Hayden, Wright, and Yeats can, in their respective fashions, be considered remembrancers. That is, their work (to paraphrase Yeats) suggests that “memories are old identities.” Hence, they often explore the vagaries of the past. A fruitful comparison might, for example, be made between Harper’s and Hayden’s poems on Vietnam. Brown and Harper are both interested in acts of heroism in African-American culture and lore. Ellison
and Harper share an inclusive vision of America that eschews racial separatism in favor of a more dualistic sense of American identity.
Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

The letter-essay is extremely effective. Here the student writes a letter to Harper, a figure who appears in one of his poems, the instructor in the class, a classmate, etc., and engages the poems through his or her own personal response to the poems. The exercise allows students to feel more comfortable posing questions as part of their inquiry and also provides an opportunity to reflect on the poem’s impact on their lives both experientially and exegetically.

Bibliography

See the interview with Harper in John O’Brien’s Interviews with Black Writers. Also see his interview in Ploughshares, Fall 1981.


The most recent retrospective on Harper’s work can be found in Callaloo 13, no. 4 (Fall 1991): 780–800.

Postmodernity and Difference:
Promises and Threats

John Barth (b. 1930)

Contributing Editor: Julius Rowan Raper

Classroom Issues and Strategies

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To call an author “a writers’ writer” is often the kiss of death. Yet Barth in “Lost in the Funhouse” and in other works goes out of his way to draw to himself this label that sets him apart from more popular “men’s writers” (or “businessmen’s writers”) like Ernest Hemingway or “women’s writers” like Willa Cather. By foregrounding the writerly nature of his work, Barth, perhaps more than any American author before him, prevents his readers from ignoring the style and form of his work while they pursue the content. Rather than focus on the relatively accessible content about Ambrose, Peter, Magda, and the three adults, as a teacher I want students to speculate about Barth’s reasons for so intrusively and self-consciously focusing on the writing process.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

At least three large explanations for the self-consciousness of Barth’s works come to mind. In *Chimera* he will have the Genie report that in the U.S. in our time “the only readers of artful fiction [are] critics, other writers, and unwilling students who, left to themselves, [prefer] music and pictures to words.” In short, a serious writer has to recognize that his only willing readers are other writers; that he or she is, in fact, a writers’ writer.

A second explanation is that, for postmodern writers, especially for Barth, the traditional modes of fiction have been used up—in Barth’s favorite term, exhausted. This is especially true of the *bildungsroman*, the story of the development of an individual, and even more so if that individual happens to be an artist. In our century, James Joyce had his Stephen Dedalus, D. H. Lawrence his Paul Morel, Sherwood Anderson his George Willard, Thomas Wolfe his Eugene Gant, Ernest Hemingway his Nick Adams, William Faulkner his Quentin Compson, and so on. “ ‘Is anything more tiresome, in fiction, than the problems of sensitive adolescents?’ ” Indeed! Even this self-negating idea has to appear in quotation marks because it has been uttered before. Rather than ignore this remark, which could easily alienate already unwilling students (one of the three groups remaining among readers of artful fictions), I would note the curious detail that Barth has his own seemingly autobiographical
portrait of an artist in the character named Ambrose Mensch (meaning roughly “Immortal Man”), who appears here and in other stories of the collection and figures as well as a major figure in the later megafiction, LETTERS: a Novel. Why would Barth devote such energy to an apparently exhausted fictional form? He obviously believes that problems of adolescents are important and that such stories can be told in a new way that “replenishes” (another key term for Barth) an entire mode of fiction. That new way must include “metafiction,” an important postmodern device that allows novelists to write the criticism of their own fiction while creating the fiction itself. The reasons metafiction has become important in our time are another large topic that could lead the class to fruitful discussions.

These could include the fact that at the critical moment in the fiction, both the boy and the writer, out of whom the reader may wish to construct a single subject, realize that the self-reflexiveness that plagues each of them “makes perfect observation impossible,” a Sartrean truth vital to many contemporary postrealist fictions.

A third explanation for the self-consciousness here is at once more personal and more cultural. The narrator of Ambrose’s story is a writer trapped inside his story, unable to come to its end. He is a blocked writer. In a number of works, Barth fictionalizes the writer’s block he apparently suffered after the two gigantic novels of the early 1960s. Self-consciousness and writer’s block may belong to a single vicious circle; each may lead to the other. Barth takes writer’s block as his theme so often that one suspects it represents more than a personal event—no matter how engrossing such “autobiographic” episodes may be to readers primarily interested in “real life.” At this other level, writer’s block appears to be Barth’s metaphor for Western Civilization at present. In the recurring conflicts between women and men, East and West, Marxists and capitalists, liberals and conservatives, and blacks and whites, our culture finds itself so lacking in true invention that it can do little except, like the fated characters in Chimera, repeat a pattern passed down through centuries, the swing of the pendulum between extremes. If the blocked writer belongs to the Waste Land, Eliot’s metaphor that haunted the twentieth century, the writer Barth imagines into being would feel more at home in the Funhouse (as opposed to the funny farm), where values and
options would be far different. At the same time, the blocked writer provides an appropriate motive for producing the metafictional passages with which Barth frames his fictions, the seeming digressions that allow him to create an audience for his generally nonrealistic stories.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

In giving up the conventional mimesis of realism, Barth, however, elects the contrary powers of what, in *Chimera*, he terms the Principle of Metaphoric Means, “the investiture by the writer of as many of the elements and aspects of his fiction as possible with emblematic as well as dramatic value” (*Chimera* 203). This device leads to an additional motive for Barth’s frequent dramatizations of the blocked writer. Such writers, as noted above, may be metaphors for something important in our culture. Students in class discussion may want to explore possible referents for the metaphor by asking themselves what aspects of American or Western culture appeared especially “blocked” in 1968, a year that, it turns out, may stand roughly as the midpoint of the Cold War. What is there about contemporary culture that it has lost its ability to move forward in the progressive fashion that the Enlightenment, Positivism, and modern scientific thinking once promised?

Students may then move to the possibility that every individual is a potential writer, that each of us lives out a script that someone else will write for us if we do not write it ourselves, that many women and men seem caught, like the narrator of this story, in scripts they do not want and whose end they cannot find. The next step would be to explore the degree to which the devices Barth employs, including metafiction, parody, Metaphoric Means, and (elsewhere) myth and fantasy, could be used to frame the stories of blocked lives, to liberate one from such narratives, and to write more promising life scripts. In short, can Barth’s postmodern approach free up blocked lives or replenish a stymied, possibly exhausted culture? If not, might the attempt to do so still comprise a tragic gesture with a touch of the heroic in it? Students could then weight the elements of parody, satire, and muted tragedy in Barth’s story.

Consideration of Metaphoric Means as a global device

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leads to a careful reconsideration of every aspect of the story, including seeming authorial mistakes. If in the postexistential world we are all writers, then not only must we watch how we dot our i’s and cross our t’s, but how we drop our apostrophes. For example, the narrator mentions “Peter and Ambrose’s father” but speaks of “Ambrose’s and Peter’s mother.” Is this a simple slip, or a telling one? Students may want to pay special attention to parallel usages in the story or explore the later adventures of Ambrose, Peter, Magda, their parents, and/or Uncle Carl in LETTERS.

Original Audience

It may appear that Barth’s audience is made up of other writers, critics, and writing teachers. If we are, however, to write our way out of the (doomed?) scripts we inherited from our culture, then every thinking person may have something to learn from Barth. The risks Barth takes indicate he arrived on the literary scene when the success of T. S. Eliot and James Joyce in having critics prepare an audience for their difficult texts inspired him to trust that time would provide readers for his works. By 1968, however, like other metafictionists to come, he was covering himself by providing guidelines, sometimes ironic ones, for critics still working within the modernist aesthetic.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

The most useful comparisons for Barth are to the international fictionists whom he cites as inspirations: Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, and Italo Calvino; and to the experimental writers who are his fellow postmodernists: Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon, Raymond Federman, Cynthia Ozick, John Hawkes, Donald Barthelme, Lawrence Durrell, John Fowles, Ishmael Reed, David Foster Wallace, Richard Powers, John Wideman, and others. The most obvious contrasts are to traditional flat realists like Cather and Hemingway, naturalists like Theodore Dreiser, engaged novelists like John Dos Passos and John Steinbeck, and representative modernists like Faulkner and Joyce, especially as the latter two use the mythic method that Barth in Chimera and elsewhere stands on its
head. Less obvious contrasts would be to the three contemporary trends that retreat from the more audacious experiments of the postmodernists: the minimalists like Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Ann Beattie; other contemporary southern authors such as Walker Percy, William Styron, Reynolds Price, and Lee Smith; and the Magical Realists, who make minimal use of the fantasy devices that Barth, like Coover, Fowles, Durrell, and Pynchon, employs with such relish. Another sort of contrast can be made—in an age that commodifies not only space and time but also gender, class, and race—to Toni Morrison, Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker, James Baldwin, E. L. Doctorow, Allen Ginsberg, among others. While for many of his contemporaries the message has become the *merchandise*, Barth persists in focusing on the challenges and powers of the fictional medium itself.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

1. “Lost in the Funhouse” cries out for student papers of two types. First, one might want students to try a reader-response approach, to let them work out their anger against intrusive metafictional commentary, to identify the causes of their anger, and perhaps discover reasons for Barth’s choosing this device. Next, students could employ a traditional close-reading approach to take up the following questions:

2. What are the indications in the story that Barth has taught creative writing courses? Is this story good pedagogy, or a parody thereof?

3. Why doesn’t the narrator complete many of his sentences? How does this fit with Barth’s interest in the literature of exhaustion? How does Barth attempt here to replenish the exhausted story of sensitive adolescents?

4. What is the temporal setting of the paragraph in which the narrator says, “I’ll never be an author”? What is the author’s problem here and how does Ambrose’s problem mirror it?

5. What happened to Ambrose in the toolshed when he was ten? How did it influence his later life? Is the lyre important?

6. What does Ambrose see under the boardwalk? How
does it affect him?

7. What is odd about Ambrose’s invitation to Magda to accompany him through the funhouse? How can you explain it?

8. What metaphors for a life, or the world of fiction, can you develop as effectively as Barth does in the funhouse?

9. How do the “head” and “eye” getting in the way affect the self-consciousness theme dramatized in the technique of the story? Is there a “human tragedy” in this problem?

10. Is Barth in danger here of turning the medium into the merchandise as well as into his message? What subject other than fiction itself would writers be in so expert a position to offer their readers? On what topics did Homer, Dante, Petrarch, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, Lawrence, and others purport to be experts? On what authority did they write of these subjects? Why might writers of Barth’s period lack the confidence of earlier ones in exploring parallel realms of knowledge?

11. If the “Funhouse” were to replace Eliot’s “Waste Land” as the reigning metaphor for contemporary culture, would it make a difference?

Donald Barthelme (1931–1989)

Contributing Editors: Linda Wagner-Martin and Charles Molesworth

Classroom Issues and Strategies

The brevity and irony of Barthelme’s work are sometimes surprising to students. Again, the high modernist quality—every word crafted for its purpose, but caught in a web of style and form that makes the whole seem artlessly natural—must be explained. Students may have read less contemporary fiction than modern and what contemporary fiction they have read may well be limited to the genres of romance, science fiction, and mystery. As with any period of art, the determining craft and language practices need explication.
In the case of such a short selection, ask students to write about the work at the beginning of the class—and again at the end, once discussion has finished—something simple like “What were your reactions to this work?” Then ask them to compare their two answers with the hope of showing them that reading must be an active process, that they must form opinions. And in this author’s case, getting his readers to respond is his first priority.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

People’s inability to learn to live in their culture, and the omnipresent romantic attitudes that society continues to inscribe, whatever the subject being considered, are the main subjects of Barthelme’s fiction. At base is the belief that people will endure, will eventually figure it out. Barthelme’s fiction is, finally, positive—even optimistic—but first readings may not give that impression.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Discuss the way humor is achieved, the interplay between irony and humor, the effects of terse and unsentimental language—students must be given ways of understanding why this story has the effect it does.

Contemporary fiction—whether minimalist or highly contrived parodic or allusive and truly postmodern—needs much more attention in the classroom. Connections must be made between writing students already understand, such as Ernest Hemingway’s, and more recent work, so that they see the continuum of artistry that grows from one generation to the next.

**Original Audience**

Anticonservative in many ways, Barthelme’s fiction taunts the current society and its attitudes at every turn. The teacher will have to be subtle in not claiming that “we all” think the way
Barthelme does, or the legions of all-American conservatives will be on his or her doorsteps; but the fiction itself can do a great deal to start students examining their own social attitudes.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

Barthelme is given as a kind of example of metafiction, which flourished in the 1970s and 1980s. Interesting approaches can be created by contrasting this fiction with much of that by writers of minority cultural groups—James Welch, Alice Walker—to see how such fiction differs.

**Bibliography**

*The Teachings of Don B.*, ed. Kim Herzinger, 1993. Also, see *The Ironist Saved from Drowning: The Fiction of Donald Barthelme* (University of Missouri, 1983), by Charles Molesworth, where this story is discussed in detail.
Classroom Issues and Strategies

Reading Pynchon’s work is never an easy task, but it can be especially daunting for a student approaching his work for the first time. Even in this relatively early story, Pynchon’s broad range of knowledge is on display and students will need to understand references to everything from the Laws of thermodynamics to the music theory behind jazz to the progressive historical model of Henry Adams’s Education. As several critics have noted (and Pynchon himself freely admits), one need not be a physicist to understand entropy at the level in which Pynchon is using it as a guiding metaphor in this story. A very basic discussion of entropy in the context of thermodynamics and information theory will greatly enhance the comprehension of the story. Critic David Seed claims that a simple explanation of the dictionary definitions of entropy suffices in this regard, but additional reference to theorists like Marshall McLuhan or Norbert Wiener (both of whom Pynchon cites as influences upon his writing) could be useful in a course beyond an introductory level.

In addition to the difficult subject matter, the language of the characters, especially those in Meatball Mulligan’s apartment, may be difficult for the students to understand, since much of it is specific to the story’s 1957 setting. Instructors may have to “translate” phrases like “tea time” or the jazzy slang used by the Duke di Angelis quartet. Furthermore, Pynchon includes a number of untranslated foreign words or phrases in the story, thus creating a further difficulty for most readers. In sum, the language of the story presents a number of obstacles for readers, even those fairly accustomed to complex material.

A good point of entry for discussion of the story is Pynchon’s satire, which ranges from an indictment of the falsity of “American expatriates around Washington” to the absurdity of music played without instruments. Having the students discern which characters Pynchon seems to be holding up for ridicule and which he seems to treat with more
sympathy can shed some light on the ways in which the various forms of entropy are used as metaphors. For example, ask the students whether or not they find themselves siding more with Meatball, Saul, or Callisto and then have them discuss whether or not they think this is consistent with Pynchon’s intention. What are the differences in their respective reactions to the force of entropy in their lives? Correspondingly, what are the differences that underlay their perceptions of entropy in the first place? Are all three characters’ attitudes satirized or does Pynchon favor one of them?

Aubade’s role in the story also serves as a good discussion starter. Her breaking the window (thus disrupting the hermetically sealed environment of Callisto’s apartment) is the final action in the story and to some extent unifies the two separate narrative strands. Have the students discuss the way Pynchon describes her actions in musical terms and compare this with the satirical portrayal of the jazz musicians in Meatball’s apartment.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

In addition to entropy, the story contains a pointed critique of attitudes associated with the so-called “Lost Generation” of American literary history. A number of the characters, especially Callisto, embody attitudes that can be read as parodies of Fitzgerald, Hemingway, etc. Also, note the satirical reference to the shallow culture of the “American expatriates” in 1957 and the ways in which the party at Meatball’s is a parody of modernist depictions of intellectual profligacy (cf. *The Sun Also Rises, The Great Gatsby,* or *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*). Such a discussion can be used as a gateway for exploring the differences between modernist and postmodernist literature.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Have the students discuss Pynchon’s lack of transitions between the two narratives (Meatball’s apartment vs. Callisto’s apartment) and how this potentially disorienting
technique both supports the central themes of the story (i.e., order, even in the elements of a story, is illusory) and also serves to accentuate the ambiguity of the ending.

Original Audience

It may be useful to contextualize the story both in terms of its original 1960 publication in *Kenyon Review* and as part of the 1984 book *Slow Learner*. Since the initial audience was minuscule (both because of the small circulation of the journal and Pynchon’s relative lack of notoriety), a discussion of the different cultural milieu into which the story emerged upon its larger-scale publication twenty-four years later can bear significant fruit. Also, reading from Pynchon’s self-deprecating comments in the introduction to *Slow Learner* may help students see how this story is in many ways an emergent, but unpolished expression of ideas that Pynchon would return to in much greater detail later in his work.

Toni Morrison (b. 1931)

*Contributing Editor: Sue Houchins*

Classroom Issues and Strategies

For the last twenty years I have taught at a women’s college where ninety-five percent of the population is what we call “the traditional age,” seventeen through twenty-two years old. These students always express dismay at three violent episodes, all of them in this section: Eva’s maternal infanticide, Sula’s digital immolation, and Chicken Little’s accidental death. I have as yet found no way to soften, prior to their reading the text, students’ outrage. However, their discomfort is allayed by our discussion of the text and of Morrison’s exploration in this book and in *Beloved* of the figure of the mother who believes she “owns her offspring” (and, therefore, who reasons she has the right to exercise the ultimate decision over her children) and our conclusion that Morrison is not advocating abuse of authority.

Some of you might also encounter the argument that
Morrison engages in a vilification/feminist castration of African-American men. I suppose some might point to Boyboy in this selection as an example of the denigration of the black man; however, I would suggest that the narrator, if not Eva, shows some compassion toward this figure who was dragged west by his employer and who despite his posturing was “defeat[ed]” by life. Further, the passages on manlove delight in black men, celebrate their sexuality, and rejoice in their verbal skills. I contend that the allegations against Morrison arise from an erroneous assumption that to write about gender is to ignore race, or, in the words of some theorists, the discourse of race and the discourse of gender are mutually exclusive. Critics such as Dorine Kondo and Mae Henderson would argue that they are not, that few have learned to read and hear race and gender together. I hope the following will suggest some strategies for doing so.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

This selection from Morrison’s *Sula* constitutes some of the most hotly contested passages in African-American women’s fiction. As you are undoubtedly aware, a number of critics—among them Barbara Smith in “Toward a Black Feminist Critical Theory”—suggest that, embedded within these chapters that celebrate “manlove” and heterosexuality, there is a lesbian “disloyal” subtext (see Teresa de Lauretis, “Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation,” in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre* edited by Sue Ellen Case for a discussion of this term). Whether you choose to explore in your classroom this homosexual reading is up to you; however, these chapters demand that you discuss the following issues of race, gender, and sexuality: (1) the social construction of race through the figure of Tarbaby and the trope of Carpenter’s Road, named after Boyboy’s employer, which defines and delimits the town; (2) the social construction of gender and its problematizing through Eva’s “test[ing] and argu[ing]” with her gentlemen callers while at the same time espousing a philosophy of a wife’s duty to be the obedient helpmeet, Eva’s matriarchal dominion over the house she crafted, through Hannah’s sexual agency and the danger she represents to married couples, through the sexual
autonomy exercised by the three generations of women in Eva’s household; (3) the social construction of heterosexuality in the discourse on “manlove”; (4) the social construction of motherhood and its problematizing through the story of saving the infant Plum, the myth of Eva’s sacrificed leg, the killing of her only son, and Hannah’s remark about loving but not liking Sula.

The “theme” of mother-daughter relationships is sometimes expanded to include the bond of female friendship, such as the one depicted between Nel and Sula. Traditionally feminist critics read the girls’ intimacy through a Chodorowian paradigm that, to summarize too simplistically, posits that female friendships reproduce the experiences of being mothered and of mothering and, therefore, are in some ways symbiotic and, thus, are related to pre-Oedipal stages in psychic development (see Nancy Chodorow, *Reproducing Motherhood*). Such readings hint at strategies for deploying subtle Freudian interpretations of parts of this selection: for example, to explain the digital mutilation, the hole-digging episodes, the death of Chicken Little, and Eva’s amputation. The inquiry into the development of our cultural understanding of childhood is obviously related to the tropes of adolescent female friendships and a female’s development into sexual maturity. Some examples are girlhood (remember the book ends with Nel recalling and lamenting, “We was girls together”) and the enigmatic deweys appropriated by Eva and transformed by her in the community’s imagination.

In addition, these passages introduce a number of themes that are reiterated in succeeding novels: scapegoating (of Boyboy by Eva, of Hannah by the townswomen, National Suicide Day as a variation on scapegoating, Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, or Sethe as the outcast in *Beloved*); flying (read Chicken Little’s death against Eva’s fall later in *Solomon*, or the myth of Solomon’s flight in the same novel—the folktale of the “flying African” recounted many times in slave narratives—see Virginia Hamilton’s *When People Could Fly*, a children’s book); symbolic naming—for example, Shadrack, or Nel, whose name reverses the letters in the heart of her mother’s name, Helene; the house, as in *Beloved* or other geographical sites—such as the Bottom in *Sula* or “Not Doctor Street” in *Song of Solomon*—as characters in the text.
You might find it fruitful to place Morrison’s work within the tradition of magical realism. Like her Latin American colleagues, her work is almost epic in scope, chronicling as it does the history of a people over five decades, for it begins in medias res and then looks back to the antebellum period when the first blacks settled in the area that was to be known as Medallion. This small Ohio town and the three generations of the Peace matriarchy that inhabit the house at 7 Carpenter’s Road write in microcosm the struggle of the African American down from the bottom, thus critiquing the myth of the American dream, the legend of “up from slavery.” In addition, faithful to the dictates of the genre, Morrison paints the small town landscape, portrays almost every African-American character, represents linguist and cultural idiosyncrasies with an almost surreal/super-real clarity; and yet at the core of this descriptive fidelity is the incongruent, the illogical, the intuitive, the magical.

Original Audience

I believe that all of Morrison’s novels have been written for a culturally diverse audience. While each work is situated within the black American community (U.S. or Caribbean), focuses almost exclusively on African-American characters, and draws upon black folk traditions and folktales, her books seem to appeal to a wide spectrum of readers as evidenced by the selection of Sula by the Book-of-the-Month-Club, of Beloved for the 1988 Pulitzer Prize, and the award of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Morrison in 1993.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Houses, such as Eva’s on Carpenter’s Road or Baby Suggs and Sethe’s on Bluestone Road (Beloved), figure importantly, albeit ambiguously throughout the history of black women’s writing. So you might compare and contrast Eva’s imprisonment but relative power with the plight of Linda Brent in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl or of the protagonist in Our Nig, or compare her to Silla in Paule Marshall’s Brown Girl, Brownstones. Marshall’s first novel is also excellent for comparing the treatment of a girl’s
achievement of psychic and sexual maturity. *Meridian* by Alice Walker may serve as another example of a text that examines an adolescent’s growing to sexuality, gender-political issues between black men and women, troubled mother-daughter relations, and the female hero as outcast. Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng* treats many of the same themes—especially the episode of hunting the wild pig and the killing of Miss Mattie’s prize bull—in the life of a Jamaican girl and even recounts the myth of the flying African. Richard Perry’s *Montgomery’s Children* deliberately draws upon the same themes and folk motifs as *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*. Look at Gloria Naylor’s *Women of Brewster Place* for a portrait of mother-son relations.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

*Study and discussion questions:* Ask students to research the biblical derivation of the appropriate characters’ names and to ascribe significance to the choice of appellation. For example, what radical theology is suggested when the character of Eve, temptress and sinner, is termed “creator and sovereign”? Or what is the significance of Hannah’s namesake, the mother of Samson? It might be helpful to assign some students the task of contextualizing the novel by researching significant events in African-American political, intellectual, and social history from 1919 (the beginning of *Sula*) until the end of the selection. Also, you can ask for a reading of a troubling passage (that is, the killing of Chicken Little, Nel and Sula digging holes in the field) or troubling characters (Shadrack, Tarbaby, the deweys).

Ishmael Reed (b. 1938)

*Contributing Editor: Michael Boccia*

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Ishmael Reed frequently offends readers, who feel that they
and the institutions they hold sacred (the church, American history, schools, etc.) are attacked and ridiculed by him. His humorous exaggerations and sharp barbs are misunderstood partly because satire and irony are so often misunderstood. In addition, most students are ignorant of the many contributions to American culture made by blacks and other minorities. Black and minority contributions in every field are highlighted in Reed’s work. Reed often lists his historical, mythical, or literary sources in the text itself and has his own version of history, politics, literature, and culture.

Pointing out that Reed is a jokester and a humorous writer often makes his work more palatable to students. Once they begin to laugh at Reed’s humor, they can take a more objective look at his condemnations of society. Of course, students refuse to accept his version of history, politics, and religion. Most commonly, students want to know if Reed’s version of the “truth” is really true. They challenge his veracity whenever he challenges their beliefs. This permits me to send them off to check on Reed’s statements, which proves rewarding and enlightening for them.

Of course, Reed does not want readers to accept a single viewpoint; he wishes our view of reality to be multi-faceted. In Reed’s Neo-HooDoo Church, many “truths” are accepted. In fact, one source that is extremely helpful in understanding Reed’s viewpoint is the “Neo-HooDoo Manifesto” (Los Angeles Free Press [18–24 Sept. 1969]: 42).

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Reed covers the gamut of issues, writing about politics, social issues, racism, history, and just about everything else. Most of his satire is aimed at the status quo, and thus he often offends readers. It is important to remind students that he is writing satire, but that there is truth to his comic attacks on the establishment. Closely related to his allusions to black artists and history are his themes. He views the counterculture as the vital force in life and hopefully predicts that the joyous side of life will triumph over the repressive side.

His radical beliefs appear as themes in his work. Knowledge of the cultures (popular, American, African, etc.) Reed draws upon is very helpful. Knowing about black history
and literature is very valuable and can best be seen through Reed’s eyes by reading his own commentary. *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* is especially helpful in this area.

Reed’s vision of history cries out for the recognition of minority contribution to Western civilization. Estaban (the black slave who led Cortez to the Grand Canyon), Squanto (the Native American who fed the Pilgrims), Sacajawea (the Native American woman who helped Lewis and Clark), and many other minority contributors are referred to in Reed’s work, and because students are often ignorant of these contributions, some small survey of minority history is very useful.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Reed’s originality is rooted in his experimental forms, so introducing the traditional art forms that Reed distorts often helps readers understand his experiments. A survey of the forms of novels, journalism, television and radio programs, movies, newsreels, popular dances, and music will help students understand the fractured forms Reed offers.

The symbols Reed selects also reflect the eclectic nature of his art, in that the symbols and their meanings include but transcend traditional significance. Reed will blend symbols from ancient Egypt with rock and roll, or offer the flip side of history by revealing what went on behind the veil of history as popularly reported. In all cases one will find much stimulation in the juxtaposition of Reed’s symbols and contexts.

**Original Audience**

The students are often angry at Reed’s satire of their culture. The provocation that they feel is precisely the point of Reed’s slashing wit. He wants to provoke them into thinking about their culture in new ways. Pointing this out to students often alleviates their anger.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**
Introducing students to Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” is an effective way to clarify how Reed’s satire functions. Few readers think that eating babies is a serious proposal by Swift, and once satire is perceived as an exaggeration meant to stir controversy and thought, students are willing to listen to Reed’s propositions.

Placing Reed in literary context is difficult because he writes in numerous genres and borrows from many nonliterary art forms. No doubt his innovations place him with writers like James Joyce and William Blake, and his satire places him among the most controversial writers of any literary period.

Certainly his use of allusion and motif is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot or James Joyce, but Reed likes to cite black writers as his models. Reed feels that the minorities have been slighted, and a review of some of the black writers he cites as inspiration is often helpful to students.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

Students respond well to hunting down the literary, historical, and topical references in the poetry. I often ask them to select a single motif, such as Egyptian myth, and track it through a poem after researching the area.

Bibliography

I strongly recommend reading Reed on Reed: *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*, especially “The Old Music,” “Self Interview,” “Remembering Josephine Baker,” and “Harlem Renaissance.”


Karen Tei Yamashita (b. 1951)

Teaching material for Karen Tei Yamashita is available on The Heath Anthology web site. (To access the site, please go to the Houghton Mifflin college home page at http://college.hmco.com. Select English, then select The Heath Anthology textbook site.)

Jessica Hagedorn (b. 1949)

Teaching material for Jessica Hagedorn is available on The Heath Anthology web site. (To access the site, please go to the Houghton Mifflin college home page at http://college.hmco.com. Select English, then select The Heath Anthology textbook site.)

Lee Smith (b. 1944)

Teaching material for Lee Smith is available on The Heath Anthology web site. (To access the site, please go to the Houghton Mifflin college home page at http://college.hmco.com. Select English, then select The Heath Anthology textbook site.)

Dorothy Allison (b. 1949)

Teaching material for Dorothy Allison is available on The Heath Anthology web site. (To access the site, please go to the Houghton Mifflin college home page at http://college.hmco.com. Select English, then select The Heath Anthology textbook site.)
Teaching material for Sherman Alexie is available on The Heath Anthology web site. (To access the site, please go to the Houghton Mifflin college home page at http://college.hmco.com. Select English, then select The Heath Anthology textbook site.)

Rolando Hinojosa-Smith (b. 1929)

Contributing Editor: Juan Bruce-Novoa

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Most students know nothing about the author or the context of this selection. Useful information can be found in Hinojosa’s interview included in Chicano Authors, Inquiry by Interview (Juan Bruce-Novoa).

I find it useful to ask students to write an accurate version of something they have experienced as a group: a short reading, a brief video, or even a planned interruption in class by an outsider. They then must consider the differences in the accounts of the same event. Sometimes I ask them to write an accurate description of an object I place in their midst; then we compare versions.

They respond to the element of different versions and observe how justice, represented in the newspaper reports, is not necessarily served. They ask if the person is guilty, raising the question of what is guilt.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

The major themes are the search for an accurate version of any event in the midst of the proliferation of information; the conflict between oral and written texts; the historical disregard for the Chicano community in South Texas and elsewhere; and
the placement of the author in the role of cultural detective. The selection can be read as an allegory of Chicano culture within U.S. history in which Mexicans have been criminalized without a fair hearing.
**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

The basic form is that of a criminal investigation, related to the detective story. Yet it breaks with the genre in that it does not resolve the case by discovery of the culprit; instead, the frame of the story maintains its position, and—if anything—gets worse, the degradation of process reflected in the errata contained in the final segment.

Fragmentation does not bother students much now. The small units emphasize the postmodern experience of life as short sound bites.

The style is marked by shifts in voices, an attempt to capture the community in its speech patterns.

**Original Audience**

In the period of Chicano renewal (1965–1975) there was a need expressed then in literature to search for communal history. It was aimed at an audience that would sympathize with the victim, considering itself an abused and ignored group in a society controlled by the forces represented in the newspaper clippings that frame the story. This has changed. Now audiences are much less sympathetic to marginal peoples, and even Chicanos are not as willing to accept the old version of oppression of minority groups.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

Faulkner’s creation of a fictional county in several works coincides well with Hinojosa’s project. The use of multiple voices to give different perspectives is quite similar.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

1. I ask students to consider what is history. What is news reporting? What is a fact? I often ask them to look up the etymology of fact and consider its relation to manufacture.
2. Assign the reporting of an imaginary event; give them the basic facts and characters and even an official summary statement. Then have them reconstruct the fragments as seen from one perspective. Compare the papers.
Audre Lorde (1934–1992)

Contributing Editor: Claudia Tate

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students need to be taught to empathize with the racial, sexual, and class characteristics of the persona inscribed in Lorde’s works. Such empathy will enable them to understand the basis of Lorde’s value formation.

Students immediately respond to Lorde’s courage to confront a problem, no matter what its difficulty, and to her deliberate inscription of the anguish that problem has caused her. Both the confrontation and the acknowledged pain serve as her vehicle for resolving the problem.

It is difficult to secure the entire corpus of her published work. Most libraries have only those works published after 1982. Many of those published prior to this date are out of print.

To address this issue, I have made special orders for texts that are still in print and asked the library to place them on reserve. In other cases, I have selected specific works from these early texts and photocopied them for class use.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Lorde’s work focuses on lyricizing large historical and social issues in the voice of a black woman. This vantage point provides stringent social commentary on white male, middle-class, heterosexual privilege inherent in the dominant culture, on the one hand, and on the disadvantage accorded to those who diverge from this so-called standard. In addition, students should be aware that there have historically been racial and class biases between white and black feminists concerning issues that centralize racial equality, like enfranchisement, work, and sexuality.
Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Students studying Lorde’s poetry should familiarize themselves with the aesthetic and rhetorical demands of the lyrical mode. In addition, they should be prepared for the high degree of intimacy inscribed in Lorde’s work.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Although Lorde is known primarily as a poet, she also wrote a substantial amount of prose. Her most prominent prose includes The Cancer Journals (1980), the record of her struggle with breast cancer; Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982), an autobiography; and Sister Outsider (1984), a collection of essays and speeches. Students should be encouraged to explore Lorde’s prose in order to see how genre mediates the expression of her most salient themes. Comparisons can also be drawn with the work of Adrienne Rich, June Jordan, and Ntozake Shange in order to stress the intimacy of the woman-centered problematic that informs and structures Lorde’s work.

Bibliography

Over the last decade Lorde has attracted considerable scholarly interest. See the headnote for a listing of recent criticism. Also see the selections in Home-making: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home, eds. Catherine Wiley and Fiona R. Barnes; Critical Essays: Gay and Lesbian Writers of Color, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson; New Lesbian Criticism: Literary and Cultural Readings, ed. Sally Munt; Some of Us Are Brave, eds. Barbara Smith et al.; Sturdy Black Bridges, eds. Gloria Hull et al.; Color, Sex, and Poetry, edited by Gloria Hull; and Wild Women in the Whirlwind, edited by Joanne M. Braxton.

John Edgar Wideman (b. 1941)

Contributing Editor: James W. Coleman
Classroom Issues and Strategies

I usually start by discussing the students’ typical responses to Wideman with them. Students, like most readers generally, want to read linear narratives that purport to relate directly to their lives, or that they can visualize in a clear real-world context, and the aspects of Wideman’s works that challenge their notions about narratives and their approaches to reading put them off. I ask them to examine their very traditional assumptions about narratives, about how narratives should relate to them, and about how they should read and judge fiction. Another question that I eventually ask is whether Wideman might have a purpose (beyond the desire to be a difficult writer) for writing as he does. And what is one of the first things about Wideman’s fiction that they should see before they try to determine his meaning and relate to his work in their usual fashion?

They should see that Wideman disrupts their normal narrative approach because as he questions and tests the process in which he engages as the writer, he wants readers to question what they do too. If students will think about it, they will see that words written on a page cannot replicate the concreteness, complexity, and convolution of their experience. The language of a narrative may pretend to appear to do so, but it cannot. This is one of the first things that Wideman reminds them of and that they must accept when they approach Wideman’s work. This does not mean that they should no longer read narratives that give them what they expect. But might there be a place for Wideman’s kind of writing, too?

Wideman shows students this, not to abdicate a social, political, and real-life responsibility in his fiction, but to indicate the difficulty of the writer’s task and the truth of what narratives are and what they do. Some students, perhaps many, however, will not be convinced by this. But some will appreciate Wideman, and one can also generate a pretty good discussion based on the students’ pure emotional response to fiction such as Wideman’s that requires them to work so hard.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

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Wideman indeed portrays clear historical perspectives and intense personal issues; however, in the context of his postmodern approach, he also questions the ability of writing to do fully and successfully what he wants it to do. In the selection in *The Heath Anthology*, “Valaida,” the Jewish experience of the Holocaust and the African-American historical experience of racism intersect, and Wideman also foregrounds the life and history of a black entertainer, Valaida Snow, whom few of us know. In a historical perspective, racism and oppression are pervasive themes in Wideman’s work.

If we move beyond “Valaida” to examine Wideman’s work since 1981, we see him focusing very directly on himself personally, on his family, and especially on the tragedies and tribulations of specific family members. Wideman’s fiction often takes as a theme the very thing that he struggles with as a writer—the quest to be a black writer who writes about the black community and its experience and makes a difference through his writing. Wideman sometimes makes himself (or a surrogate writer figure) a character in his fiction, and shows himself as a character undergoing the struggle that he undergoes as a writer in real life. He writes intimately about people in his family and about a community of black people in the process.

The tragic stories of Wideman’s brother and son have also become major aspects of his work since 1981. Starting in *Hiding Place* (1981) and *Damballah* (1981) and reaching a focus in the semifictional *Brothers and Keepers* (1984), Wideman deals with his relationship to his younger brother Robby, jailed for life for robbery and murder. And in *Philadelphia Fire* (1990), some of the stories in *All Stories Are True* (1993); and *Fatheralong: A Meditation on Fathers and Sons, Race and Society* (1994), he talks to his incarcerated son.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

As I have been saying, Wideman will seem very unconventional to many student readers. He uses modernist techniques and creates dense modernist fictional forms in his early work, but the majority of his work since 1981 utilizes postmodernist approaches and techniques. However, this later...
work also draws increasingly on black cultural forms, on religious rituals and practices, black folk stories, and black street ways, for example. “Valaida” is a story that combines a postmodernist approach with the traditional African-American themes of racism and oppression.

Original Audience

Wideman has always enjoyed high praise from critics, intellectuals, and some academics, but he has never had a wide general audience. Few undergraduates have heard of Wideman, and fewer have read anything by him. Yet Wideman’s books continue to win awards, and critics continue to praise him. Perhaps Wideman’s work draws acclaim from critics, intellectuals, and academics for the same reason (its complexity and ingenuity) that it denies access to more general readers.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

On the one hand, Wideman provides a contrast to other black writers who do not make the writing itself an explicit theme, and this is the large majority of them, I think. This would include so difficult and complex a writer as Toni Morrison, who manages to keep her focus on the theme of black struggle without foregrounding the problems and difficulties of writing the narrative itself. But on the other hand, there are black writers such as Charles Johnson who share concerns about writing similar to Wideman’s, and Wideman’s thematic concern with racism and the black cultural tradition connects him strongly to the black literary tradition generally. I would also point out that Wideman’s work separates itself from the radical textuality, the complete focus on language and the workings of the narrative, of such white writers as Raymond Federman and Ronald Sukenick. And the reality of Wideman’s narratives is not the same detached reality of a writer such as Thomas Pynchon.
Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

The following study questions may be helpful for “Valaida”: How do the story’s style and form force you to approach it? What is the connection of the italicized section at the beginning to the rest of the story? What is the relationship between the story Mr. Cohen tells Mrs. Clara and the beginning section? What is Mr. Cohen trying to do by telling Mrs. Clara the story? How do style, form, and theme coalesce in the story? Students might start to approach writing about “Valaida” by looking at this convergence of style, form, and theme and the resulting tension between postmodernist treatment and social and political intention.

Bibliography

Although Wideman published his first book in 1967 and has published thirteen books since then, one still finds a relative dearth of work about him. The most comprehensive source is James W. Coleman’s Blackness and Modernism: The Literary Career of John Edgar Wideman (1989), which has an interview with Wideman as an appendix. Other helpful interviews are John O’Brien’s in Interviews with Black Writers (1973) and Wilfred Samuel’s “Going Home: A Conversation with John Edgar Wideman,” Callallo 6 (February 1983): 40–59. Good analyses of Wideman’s works also appear in Bernard W. Bell’s The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition (1987); Michael G. Cooke’s Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century: The Achievement of Intimacy (1981); and Trudier Harris’s Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals (1984). Kermit Frazier’s “The Novels of John Wideman,” Black World, v. 24, 8 (1975): 18–35 is one of the very first pieces on Wideman and is still useful. The Callabo special issue on Wideman, v. 22, 3 (Summer 1999), is a very important addition to the scholarly work on the writer.

Maxine Hong Kingston (b. 1940)
Classroom Issues and Strategies

The primary question for any initial reading of Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* has to do with genre or form. Is this text nonfiction? (It won the National Book Critics Circle Award for the best book of nonfiction published in 1976.) Since the word “memoirs” is in the title, is it autobiography? Or is it a piece of imaginative fiction, which seems most apparent in the “White Tigers” chapter included in this anthology? *The Woman Warrior*, of course, is all of the above, sequentially and simultaneously.

As Kingston does not maintain a unity of genre, neither does she maintain a unity of diction. “White Tigers” begins with a colloquial tone, a woman speaking informally about her Chinese-American female upbringing. It then goes into a conditional tense and a story-telling mode—“The call would come from a bird that flew over our roof”—into a narration filled with magical details, described at times in a matter-of-fact manner, at other times in an elevated, poetic style. Then, without warning, the language and the subject matter lapse abruptly from the fanciful to the everyday in the sudden, disruptive line, “My American life has been such a disappointment.” In diction and language also, *The Woman Warrior* is dialogic.

“The White Tigers” has been called by David Leiwei Li, “a version of the Kung Fu movie interspliced with a Western.” Feminists, however, admire the anger and power of the female avenger whose patient and lengthy training enables her to slice off the head of the misogynist baron in one stroke. Chinese Americans appreciate Hong Kingston’s skill not only in beautifully elaborating on a popular ancient Chinese ballad, “The Magnolia Lay,” but in making its traditional Chinese heroine relevant to a contemporary Chinese-American girl’s life.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

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Since her mother’s talking-story was one of the major forces of her childhood and since she herself is now talking-story in writing this book, stories, factual and fictional, are an inherent part of Kingston’s autobiography. Finding one’s voice in order to talk-story, a metaphor for knowing oneself in order to attain the fullness of one’s power, becomes one of the book’s major themes.

As the second chapter of a five-chapter book, “White Tigers” is best understood in the context and thematic structure of the entire work. The book’s first chapter, “No Name Woman,” tells the story of the paternal aunt who bears a child out of wedlock and is harried by the villagers and by her family into drowning herself; the family now punishes this taboo-breaker by never speaking of her, by denying her her name. The author, however, breaks the family silence by writing about this rebel whom she calls “my forebear.” “No Name Woman” presents the cautionary tale of woman as victim; “White Tigers,” however, provides the model to emulate. This pattern, woman as victim then victor, is repeated throughout the text.

In like manner, Kingston inverts historical misogynist Chinese practices, such as footbinding and female infanticide, by claiming that perhaps women’s feet were bound because women were so strong. Victory over handicaps, over racial and sexual devaluation is Kingston’s purpose.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

One of the distinctive accomplishments of *The Woman Warrior* is that it crosses boundaries between genres, dictions, styles, between fact and fiction, as it crosses the boundaries between cultures, Chinese and American. In the collage of style and form, in the amalgam of language and content, in the combination of Chinese myth, family history, and American individualism and rebelliousness, Kingston defines herself as a Chinese-American woman.

**Original Audience**
The Woman Warrior is decidedly a product of the sixties, of the civil rights and women’s liberation movements. It directly addresses Chinese Americans, whom it seeks to bring into its exploration of identity, but, as an immigrant story for a nation of immigrants, it is obviously intended as well for a mainstream audience.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Like other women and ethnic writers such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Toni Morrison, and Adrienne Rich who appropriated and revisioned myths for their own uses, so Kingston appropriated the tale of the legendary Fa Mulan for her own purposes. The original ballad of the Chinese woman warrior is recorded in a fifth-century ballad of sixty-two lines; Kingston elaborates considerably on this ballad. Her most significant addition, however, is the woman warrior’s marriage and childbearing while still in armor disguised as a man. In the original ballad, Mulan performs these roles sequentially; in Kingston’s version, simultaneously. With this change, Kingston crosses gender barriers and separate spheres, creating a heroine who is at once a feared warrior and a tender mother.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. Which aspects of Kingston’s childhood experience is true of all immigrants in the United States? What is particular to Chinese Americans?
2. Of what use is the fabulous story of the woman warrior to the daily life of the narrator?
3. Has Kingston in her life inverted the woman as victim into woman as victor? Research and explain.

Bibliography


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Classroom Issues and Strategies

The father’s patriarchal and feudal attitudes can easily arouse feminist ire. While such attitudes need to be acknowledged and discussed, it is important to point out the narrator’s viewpoint toward her father. The narrator pulls no punches in pointing out Ralph Chang’s sexist and domineering ways. Such information does not, however, trigger brooding resentment or a desire for vengeance. In addressing this issue in the classroom, the instructor might combine feminist and cultural theories to promote a richer understanding of difference.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues
A key theme found in Jen’s work is the Asian immigrant’s coming to terms with American society. For people who come from cultures that are significantly different from the hegemonic European one, the process of acculturation can be awkward and even destructive. Like the father’s western suit, Asians who take on what they consider typically American culture often find that this does not fit well. The mother’s statement “But this here is the U—S—of—A!” reveals the disease with which nonwhite, non-Europeans attempt to assimilate into European American society. Historically excluded from the “good life,” Americans of Asian descent necessarily exhibit ambivalence toward symbols of American success, such as the town country club that is about to be sued by a waiting black family.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

The two-part structure of the story offers us a view of the father’s feudal lord behavior in two different settings. In the first, treating his employees like servants—even if done magnanimously—simply does not work. In the second, the same arrogant impulse stands him in good stead when confronting racism. The structure gives us a clear picture of Ralph Chang’s background and personality and enables us to consider the appropriateness of social behavior based on class and cultural differences.

The use of an observer/child narrator who is older and more reserved than the talkative younger sister Mona lends credibility to the narration and situates the story in a comfortable, firsthand point of view. The narrator’s English fluency and assumption of her American birthright render her voice easily accessible to a white audience. In this story, at least, there are no barriers based on language.

**Original Audience**

“In the American Society” was first published in *Southern Review* in 1986. It was subsequently anthologized in various collections of contemporary literature and, in 1999, it was included in Jen’s own short story collection, *Who’s Irish?* As one of the author’s first published works and the prototype for
the Chang family in *Typical American*, the story has garnered an academic audience of students, teachers, and scholars. Its special blend of disarming humor and social commentary has also rendered this and other works by Jen consistently appealing to the general reader.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

Jen’s stories are easily anthologized and can be compared to numerous American short stories—immigrant, classic, and ethnic—that explore issues of Americanization and the tensions that exist among various American cultures.

**Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing**

In teaching ethnic literature I use the approach of moving from the familiar—what European-American students already know about and have in common with all human beings as well as what they know about literature—to the unfamiliar. This strategy helps students and instructors get past their fear of what seems foreign: namely the “exotic other.” Questions such as the following might be helpful:

1. Describe the dynamics of this nuclear family. What is the relationship of each family member to the others, and how does this reflect or challenge your notions of family?
2. Identify the source of humor in this story. How does humor contribute to the tone, mood, and overall message of the work?
3. How does the two-part narrative structure of the story enable meaningful comparison/contrast between the father’s own society and the rest of American society? Is there ironic contrast between the two sections?
4. Does the dialogue seem realistic? How does the writer use dialogue to convey the racist, sexist, and classist attitudes of the characters?
Contemporary Period: 1945 to the Present • 921
Janice Mirikitani (b. 1942)

Contributing Editor: Shirley Lim

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students need to learn about the internment of Japanese-American citizens during World War II. You might consider reading historical extracts of laws passed against Japanese Americans during internment or passages from books describing camp life. If possible, show students paintings and photographs of internment experience. Students tend to resist issues of racism in mainstream white American culture; counter this tendency by discussing the long history of persecution of Asians on the West Coast.

Deal with the strong aural/oral quality of Mirikitani’s writing—the strong protest voice.

Students often raise questions about the poet’s anger: How personally does the reader take this? How successfully has the poet expressed her anger and transformed it into memorable poetry? What kinds of historical materials does the poet mine? Why are these materials useful and significant?
Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Themes are the historical documentation of legislation against Asians in the United States; internment during World War II; Mirikitani’s father’s experience in Tule Lake during World War II; economic and psychological experiences of Japanese Americans during that period; stereotypes of Asian-American women in U.S. popular culture.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Consider the issue of protest and oral poetry; traditions of such poetry in black literature in the 1960s and 1970s; influence of “black is beautiful” movement on Mirikitani.

Original Audience

Consider the didactic and sociopolitical nature of the writing: a divided audience; her own people and an audience to be persuaded and accused of past prejudices. Much of her poetry was written in the 1970s at the peak of social protests against white hegemony.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Compare her poems with Sonia Sanchez and Don L. Lee, for example, on sociopolitical and minority concerns.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. Personal accounts or observations of racism at work in their own society.
2. How they themselves perceive Asian Americans; their stereotypes of Asian-American women.
Bibliography

Refer to Mini Okubo’s books on camp life, the movie of the Houston’s book on Manzanar, and newspaper accounts of the recent debate and settlement of repayments to Japanese Americans for injustice done to them by the U.S. government during their internment period. See also Deirdre Lashgari’s “Disrupting the Deadly Stillness: Janice Mirikitani’s Poetics of Violence” in Violence, Silence, and Anger: Women’s Writing as Transgression (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995); and Stan Yogi’s “Yearning for the Past: The Dynamics of Memory in Sansei Internment Poetry” in Approaches to American Ethnic Literatures (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996).

Kimiko Hahn (b. 1955)

Teaching material for Kimiko Hahn is available on The Heath Anthology web site. (To access the site, please go to the Houghton Mifflin college home page at http://college.hmco.com. Select English, then select The Heath Anthology textbook site.)

Gloria Anzaldúa (b. 1942)

Contributing Editor: Kristin Dietsche

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students may be challenged or even put off by Anzaldúa’s tone, the non-linear form of her argument, her explicit feminism, and her use of Spanish, Nahuatl, and Chicano languages along with English. Students’ reactions to the work may be the best place to begin a discussion of the text’s challenges to linguistic, literary, and cultural boundaries, and an instructor might begin to work on student resistance by asking whether they considered themselves part of the
intended audience of *Borderlands/La Frontera*. A class might work toward isolating those features that they found persuasive or made them feel invited to enter the argument of the text and those that may have made them feel excluded. This exercise will position students on the borderlands of Anzaldúa’s text and open a way to implement her own strategy of transforming resistance into a consciousness that is able to hold contradictory positions simultaneously.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

The form of *Borderlands* resists traditional literary classification, and its intentionally antiliterary qualities might provide an entry into a discussion of the roles of both form and intention in an ongoing discussion of canon. The text does not fall easily into traditionally “privileged” genres like epic, novel, lyric, short fiction, or even essay and autobiography. She combines personal narrative, folklore, history, personal revelation, and poetry and uses a wide range of seemingly contradictory features from conversational slang to footnote citations of academic authorities.

Students who keep reading journals might be asked to stop and record their expectations for the text after reading the first page of “Entering into the Serpent.” They might identify features of narrative here and expect to read a first-person short story, an expectation that is fully frustrated by the third page. Experiences of confusion, uncertainty, and ambiguity along with frustration at the failure of the text to follow a clear narrative course can be legitimized in discussion as the class works to understand why the author may want to provoke these kinds of responses.

Anzaldúa has created a work that cannot be judged using traditional critical tools. She speaks of her text instead as an “Aztec-like” mosaic—“a weaving pattern, thin here, thick there” (66) and, later, “a flawed thing, a clumsy, complex groping thing” but alive (67). The text actively challenges both what literature and feminist argument are supposed to be while creating a new hybrid all its own. You might use a close reading of the first paragraph of “A Tolerance for Ambiguity” in *La conciencia de la mestiza* as a way to explore ways that the form of the larger work reflects its thesis.
Original Audience

The potential audience for this work is a crucial question, and since it is a fairly contemporary text students might be brought into a discussion of whether they think they are a part of it. Is she writing to speakers of all these languages, perhaps *tejanas* or *mestizas* like herself, or is her audience broader? What is the effect of writing in languages that the audience may not understand? You may consider asking students who know Spanish to talk about and translate some of the Spanish passages. Do native speakers make different observations from students studying Spanish as a second language? Are there students who are able to identify different kinds of Spanish used in the text or students who are familiar with the various dialects she has chosen? You might also discuss the whole issue of “translation”—and suggest Spanish speakers supply missed nuance. Students can bring different linguistic authority to an analysis of this text, illustrating that while this work may be difficult, the traditional literary academy (English professors) may not be the best place to look for the right answers or the best interpretation. Instead, the reader must consult a *mestiza* for answers and interpretation.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

For Anzaldúa, the choice of language itself becomes a significant personal and political decision, one as significant as her challenge to political authority and patriarchal culture. Language is a significant part of Anzaldúa’s cultural identity, and she chooses border language to express her border self, a self speaking from the languages of multiple cultures.

Connections might be made between Anzaldúa’s argument and the experiences of students through an analysis of the languages that define their own cultures. In Chapter 5 of *Borderlands*, she lists some of the languages that Chicanos speak:

1. Standard English
2. Working-class and slang English
3. Standard Spanish
4. Standard Mexican Spanish
5. North Mexican Spanish dialect
6. Chicano Spanish (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California have regional variations)
7. Tex-Mex
8. Pachuco (called caló)

Using this list as a starting point, students might be encouraged to list the languages that they and their family members speak. What kind of authority do these languages hold? Are there social consequences for their use? Are these languages complicit in structures of political power? Which of these languages come from the borderlands? Do any have the potential to express a “new mestiza consciousness”? While Anzaldúa says that Spanish-speaking people accuse her of either “speaking the oppressor’s language by speaking English” or “ruining the Spanish language” by writing in substandard dialect, she defends her choice of English and Chicano Spanish. For people who are neither Spanish nor English, she argues “what recourse is there left but to create their own language” (55), and she maintains “Chicano Spanish is not incorrect, it is a living language” (55).

From the borders of language and dialect a class might list other borders that this work challenges—cultural, historical, geographical, sexual, metaphysical, for instance. This listing exercise might then be followed by a discussion of which borders are “real” and which are “imaginary.” Here you might examine “The Presences” in Entering into the Serpent.

Students might be encouraged to try to write in Anzaldúa’s multi-voiced form in order to write about la fronteras of their own cultural experiences. To do this, some care should be taken to identify “borders” in your own community: Where are they located? Who do they divide? Is language an issue? Is there a potential for mestiza consciousness?

Judith Ortiz Cofer (b. 1952)

Contributing Editor: Juan Bruce-Novoa

Classroom Issues and Strategies
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Ortiz Cofer is quite clear and accessible, although students have questions about who she is and why she uses Spanish. I present the students something from my own cultural background, with allusions to Mexican history and culture. Then I ask them to jot down what has been said. We compare the results, finding that those who do not share the background will choose different elements out of the material than those who come from a background similar to my own. We discuss the function of ethnic identification through shared allusions about the drawing of the ethnic circle around some readers, while excluding others, even when the latter can understand the words.

Students respond to the theme of the abandoned female, which often results in discussions of the single-parent family.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

The theme of male absence and women who wait is perhaps the major one touched on here. Also, there is the historical theme of Puerto Ricans and other minorities in the military as a way of life that both gives them mobility yet divides their families.

The colonization of Puerto Rico by the U.S. and the division of its population into island and mainland groups are reflected in the division of the family. The bilingual child is another result of the confluence of these two nations, reflected in the preoccupation with which of the languages authority will accept from would-be participants.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

This is confessional poetry, but with a twist. The author walks a fine line between writing for her own group and writing for the general audience. Thus she introduces Spanish and some culture items from the island, but recontextualizes them into English and U.S. culture. The style becomes an intercultural hybrid.
Original Audience

There is the Puerto Rican audience that will bring to the poems a specific knowledge of cultural elements that they share with the poet. This audience will place the poem in a wider catalog of cultural references. The non-Puerto Rican audience must draw only from the information given, and will perhaps apply the situations to universal myths or archetypes.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

You can compare her well to many other women writers, especially in the sense of women alone in a male world. For example, “Claims” can be read with Lorna Dee Cervantes’s “Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway.”

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. I ask them to consider what is the function of ethnic writing. How does it work for insiders as compared to outsiders? They should try to determine at what point ethnic writing becomes incomprehensible to outsiders, and what it means to open it to readers beyond the ethnic circle.
2. Write on the theme of the distant patriarch in U.S. contemporary life.
3. Write on the pros and cons of foreign language in literature. The “God” of “Latin Women Pray” can be taken as a metaphor for the U.S. reading public.

Bibliography

Tato Laviera (b. 1951)

Contributing Editor: Frances R. Aparicio

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Give handouts or glossaries that explain local references and Spanish words; also it might be helpful to try to translate Spanish phrases and words, in order to show the unique value of bilingualism within Laviera’s poetry, and the fact that most of it is untranslatable.

It would be wonderful to recite Laviera’s poems aloud and to introduce them to the students as such, as oral poetry. One might also relate his poetry to the tradition of rapping in New York City. Again, students need to clarify references to Puerto Rico and El Barrio with which they might be unfamiliar. They respond to issues of bilingual education, social criticism, and language (Spanish in the United States). Discussions on how Anglo monolingual students feel when reading Hispanic bilingual poetry such as Tato Laviera’s and Hernández Cruz’s texts can lead to fruitful observations on patterns of exclusion and marginalization in the United States via language and linguistic policies.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Major themes are tension between Puerto Rican and Nuyorican societies and identity; language and bilingualism as ethnic identity markers; life in El Barrio; music and popular culture; denouncement of social institutions such as schools, Puerto Rican and U.S. governments, the Catholic church, etc.; major context of the history of Puerto Rican immigration to the U.S. and Operation Bootstrap in the 1940s and 1950s; presence of African-Caribbean and African-American cultures.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions
Laviera’s poetry best exemplifies the new genre of bilingual poetry in the United States. Discuss historical context of bilingual literature in other countries, aesthetic innovation within contemporary literature, political stance, use of oral speech and traditions versus written, academic, and intellectual poetry; relate to Mexican-American poets, and to African-American poets of the 1960s and discuss the common space between the black poets and Laviera’s work regarding the reaffirmation of the African heritage for both communities. How do they differ and what do they have in common?

Original Audience

This is poetry meant to be sung and recited. Originally addressed to the Puerto Rican community in New York and presented in the Nuyorican Café, it is poetry for the masses.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

Study questions for Laviera would try to help students contextualize his poetry both historically and aesthetically. For example:

1. How would you describe El Barrio in New York? How does Laviera present it in his poems?
2. After reading Laviera’s poems, how would you define poetry? What kind of language is appropriate for poetry? Would Laviera’s work fit into your definition?

A good and challenging writing assignment is to ask students to write their own bilingual poem (using any other language they may know). Discuss problems and effects.

Paper topics would include textual analysis of one poem; a discussion of the functions of language and bilingualism, and its problems; language and ethnic identity; the functions of humor and irony.

Bibliography
The story touches on so many social issues that class discussion is almost assured. Some students, however, may express a sense of overkill: too many social and political ills too rapidly referenced to produce a profound impression. The class may also divide over the issues, some finding that they are so often covered by the media that they hardly need repetition, while others like the story because it seems like a familiar exposé on subjects they consider everyday reality.

You may find yourself in a discussion more of the headnote and its advocacy of the rights of undocumented aliens than of the story itself. I would try to focus on close textual reading to prevent the discussion from drifting away from the text and into arguments over social and political policies. Yet, some explanation of U.S. immigration policies and the political issues in Central America may be necessary (see “Historical Perspectives”).

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Viramontes has published few stories and the headnote
provides ample information on her themes and the personal connection with them. Historically, however, students may need more help. The Latino characters are undocumented aliens, and as such they can be detained by Immigration and Naturalization agents. After a hearing, they can be repatriated to their country of origin. However, in the recent past the process for Central Americans has more often than not tended to allow delay of their return, especially for those who claim political asylum. For Mexican aliens, the process is usually more automatic, although their return to the U.S. is also quite usual. The headnote suggests that the female refugee comes from El Salvador, which may provoke some confusion, since in the story her son is accused of collaborations with “Contras,” a right wing terrorist group supported by the U.S. in the 1980s to undermine the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. This could lead to ambiguous interpretations (just who has killed the woman’s son, the Nicaraguan left or the Salvadorean right?) that can be used to lend the story interesting ambiguity to undermine simplistic political positions of right and wrong.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Narrative perspective varies, moving from one character to another. While the technique may disorient some students, most will have encountered it in previous studies. It is important for them to note how Viramontes changes diction levels to achieve characterization. The use of interior monologue, especially in Section II, is noteworthy but not difficult to comprehend. The dashes of the “Rashamon” technique—the viewing of the same event from different perspectives at different times—adds to the text’s fragmented feel.
Original Audience

Viramontes addresses a contemporary U.S. audience with topics relatively well known to most readers.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Comparisons can be made with Rolando Hinojosa’s selection, which also utilizes the fragmented narrative while the subtlety of Hinojosa’s social commentary can be contrasted with Viramontes’s blatant approach. One might also place Viramontes in the tradition of such writers as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, or Upton Sinclair, writers who did not shy away from explicit advocacy of political positions, even at the risk of melodramatic excess. While the headnote refers to García Márquez and Isabel Allende, there is little of the Latin American Magical Realism associated with those authors; the connection would be to their political positions, not to their style.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. The basic assignment here is to establish how the story is being narrated: From whose perspective is something seen? Then I ask students to characterize the different perspectives by picking specific words, turns of phrases, motifs, and so on.
2. I ask students to identify the specific Latino content of the story. Then I ask them to consider if the experiences apply to other immigrant groups, or the human condition in general.
3. This story lends itself to creative writing assignments. Have students pick a recent news event and narrate it from the objective perspective of a reporter and then from at least two others; for example, a witness of and a participant in the event.

Bharati Mukherjee (b. 1940)

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Classroom Issues and Strategies

It is important to read and discuss Mukherjee’s “A Wife’s Story” as an integral part of twentieth-century American literature and not as an “exotic” short story by a foreign writer. As the essay accompanying “A Wife’s Story” points out, Mukherjee identifies herself very strongly as an American writer writing about twentieth-century Americans. Although most of her stories are about South Asian Americans (South Asia in the contemporary geopolitical arena usually consists of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives Islands), she sees herself as being primarily influenced by, as well as being part of, the tradition of Euro-American writers. In a brief interview published in the November, 1993 issue of San Francisco Focus in which she discusses her novel, The Holder of the World, she says, “I think of myself as an American writer . . . I want to focus on the making of the American mind.” But instead of an exploration of the making of the American mind, The Holder of the World is a reflection and an echoing of the existing, dominant American attitudes and concepts about the American colonial period and the “exotic” India of the past with self-indulgent emperors and rajas, wealthy merchants and self-sacrificing women.

In order to avoid the trap of reading “A Wife’s Story” as being from a “marginal” group, I have found it best to first discuss the crafting of the story as a literary work in the tradition of English/American literature, and then move on to the aspects of the story that deal with specific concepts and cultures.

Keeping in mind Mukherjee’s own comments on racism, multiculturalism, and literary influences, it is interesting to discuss how she uses, or does not use, her ideas on these subjects in “A Wife’s Story.” A classroom discussion on the students’ views regarding these concepts helps them understand the importance of these concepts in American literature.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

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I have found the following assignments/approaches helpful:

1. Discuss the story as a literary work.
2. Read stories and poems by other American writers who deal with the American expatriate/immigrant experience and compare/contrast “A Wife’s Story” with the other readings. The bibliography that follows includes some collections of immigrant/expatriate writings.
3. Gain some knowledge of the history of Asian Americans, especially within the context of the different patterns of immigration in the U.S.
4. I have sometimes asked students to interview expatriates of immigrants from South Asia on the campus or in their community and see how Mukherjee’s story and her distinctive literary style differ from, expand upon, imitate, or use the style and subject matter of the oral history/interviews conducted by the students. This is often a suitable time to discuss, compare, and contrast the styles and techniques of oral and written literature.
5. I have sometimes invited South Asian women from the community to speak to us of their experiences in the United States with an emphasis on how they would communicate their experiences to a larger audience. For example, we ask the guest speakers about the kinds of stories they would like to write for a book or for a TV show that deals with South Asian Americans.
6. Interestingly, after having read the works of South Asian–American writers, many students have explored the immigrant histories of their own families and have then written stories, poems, essays, and screen/TV scripts based on their projects.

Further discussions of the story, especially on specific issues related to Mukherjee’s major themes and the literary influences that emerge out of her root culture, may be based on the statements made in the following parts of this Instructor’s Guide essay.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**
Mukherjee’s earlier works dealt mainly with encounters between cultures that take place when her South Asian–American protagonists who live in Canada or the U.S. return as visitors to their home in India (Tiger's Daughter and Days and Nights in Calcutta). Her later, and maybe more important works, deal with these encounters as they take place in America. The protagonists in her later works are not all from South Asia, but nearly all of them are people who have arrived in America during this century.

Her 1993 novel, The Holder of the World, takes place in the United States as well as in India. It also takes place across historical time. The framework of the novel takes place in contemporary United States and India. The central story takes place in seventeenth-century America and India. The Euro-American woman protagonists of this work have lovers who are from other cultures or countries.

Her 1997 novel, Leave It to Me, takes the reader from Asia to the United States, from the San Francisco of the 1960s to the San Francisco of the 1990s. It is a fiercely independent novel which shows Mukherjee’s grasp of the landscapes and cultures of the late-twentieth-century “globalization” of California and Asia.

A significant number of her stories and novels present the encounters between cultures in the context of encounters between women and men either of different root cultures or from the same root culture. Some of these very personal encounters have the poignancy of underlying affection, some of them range from gentle humor to an attempt at broad satire, some are marred by stereotypical characters and events, while others reveal the dangerous, violent side of such encounters.

“A Wife’s Story” is an excellent example of encounters between cultures presented in a narrative of encounters between women and men. It is a fascinating story because it presents the surprise of role reversal and because of the sense of a dramatic presentation that permeates the story. It is the wife, not the husband, who has come to America and who is knowledgeable about this new home. Panna is the guide and often the protector for her husband who is visiting her. And her story is constantly dramatic. It begins with her in a theatre and every episode that follows is carefully situated in a stage-like setting with set actors.

The story also contains echoes of the memory and nostalgia for the past that plays a significant role in the
writings of many South Asian Americans. This memory and nostalgia for the landscape of places and people of the writers’ childhood is often juxtaposed with the excitement and challenges of their new life and the unfamiliar landscape of the people and places of the U.S. It is interesting to explore how Mukherjee uses these two strands in this story, bringing one or the other—memory or the excitement of novelty—into the foreground to present her characters and to build the circular, winding pattern of her story.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Much as Mukherjee seems to insist that she belongs to the Euro-American traditions of American literature and as easily as she is able to be fit into that tradition, there are aspects of her work that are derived mainly from her cultural roots in India. She has spoken of the important influences in her life of the images and ideas of her childhood in India and the sounds and sights of the great traditions of Indian mythology and literature. Her awareness of these influences enriches her stories and novels. For example, she can give the impression of a larger work even in a short story such as “A Wife’s Story,” which carefully meanders from one place to another and in which stories live within other stories. This technique of winding stories and embedding stories within stories dominates the Sanskrit epics, the _Mahabharata_ and the _Ramayana_, and much of Indian literature.

Her ability to let us hear her characters speak to us not only about themselves but as narrators of others’ experiences is a reflection of the oral traditions of Indian literature. In “A Wife’s Story,” we can hear Panna telling us not only the many stories of her life in India and in New York but also the stories of the people she introduces to us.

Bharati Mukherjee is an enthusiastic and extremely knowledgeable collector of Indian miniatures. Keeping in mind this interest in miniatures, we see that Mukherjee can also paint small-scale yet detailed episodes and characters.

Mukherjee’s careful manipulation of moods and emotional tones in her stories may be influenced by classical Indian literature, art, and music. In Indian classical art, the universally recognizable essence of an emotion or a mood often dominates the work of art. In “A Wife’s Story,”

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Mukherjee portrays Panna through her emotions and moods that move from anger and outrage to perplexity and frustration, to humor and affection, and in the end to the joy of self-discovery of her body and her sense of freedom. Even the memory of old customs, and the excitement of new discoveries for both Panna and her husband are presented in terms of emotions and moods.

Bibliography

Collections that contain South Asian–American writings:

A Meeting of Streams: South Asian Canadian Literature.

Aziz, Nurjehan, ed. Her Mother’s Ashes and Other Stories:


**South Asians in America:**


**Anthologies of cross-cultural and multicultural writings:**


Rustomji-Kerns, Rashni (with Rajini Srikanth and Lenny Strobel). *Encounters: People of Asian Descent in the*
Gary Soto (b. 1952)

Contributing Editor: Raymund Paredes

Classroom Issues and Strategies

As a Chicano working-class poet, Soto sometimes uses figurative language that might be unfamiliar to and difficult for some readers. Occasionally, he uses a Spanish word or phrase. As a poet with a strong sense of kinship with people who are poor, neglected, and oppressed, Soto tries to create poetry out of ordinary working-class experience and images. All this is very different from typically bourgeois American poetry.

It is useful to connect Soto’s work to contemporary events in Mexican-American experience. Reading a bit about Cesar Chavez and the California farmworker struggle places some of Soto’s sympathies in context. General reading in Chicano (or Mexican-American) history would also be useful. It is also useful to consider Soto among other contemporary poets whose sensibilities were shaped by the post-1960s struggles to improve the circumstances of minority groups and the poor.

Urge students to try to see the world from the point of view of one of Soto’s working-class Chicanos, perhaps a farmworker. From this perspective, one sees things very differently than from the point of view generally presented in American writing. For the tired, underpaid farmworker, nature is neither kind nor beautiful, as, for example, Thoreau would have us believe. Soto writes about the choking dust in the fields, the danger to the workers’ very existence that the sun...
represents. Imagine a life without many creature comforts, imagine feelings of hunger, imagine the pain of knowing that for the affluent and comfortable, your life counts for very little.

Students are generally moved by Soto’s vivid and honest presentation of personal experiences, his sympathy for the poor, and the accessibility of his work. They generally wish to know more about Mexican American and Mexican cultures, more about the plight of farmworkers and the urban poor.
Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Despite Soto’s distinctiveness, he is very much a contemporary American poet. Like many of his peers, he writes largely in an autobiographical or confessional mode. As an intensively introspective poet, he seeks to maintain his connection to his Mexican heritage as it exists on both sides of the border. His work often focuses on the loss of a father at an early age, on the difficulties of adolescence (especially romantic feelings), and the urgency of family intimacy. On a broader level, Soto speaks passionately on behalf of tolerance and mutual respect while he denounces middle- and upper-class complacency and indifference to the poor.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Again, Soto is very much a contemporary American poet, writing autobiographically in free verse and using images that are drawn from ordinary experience and popular culture. His sympathies for the poor are very typical of contemporary writers from ethnic or underprivileged backgrounds. It is also important to note that some of Soto’s poetry has been influenced by the “magical realism” of modern Latin American writing, especially Gabriel García-Márquez.

Original Audience

Although Soto is a Chicano poet in that his Mexican-American heritage is a key aspect of his literary sensibility, he nevertheless aims for a wider audience. He clearly wants a broad American audience to feel sympathies for his poetic characters and their circumstances. The product of a contemporary sensibility, Soto’s poetry is topical and vital.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Again, as an autobiographical poet, Soto can be compared with
such figures as Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath. His working-class sensibility is reminiscent of James Wright and Philip Levine (who was Soto’s teacher at California State University, Fresno). His celebration of certain Chicano values and denunciation of bigotry is comparable to that of other Chicano poets such as Lorna Dee Cervantes.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. Students might be asked to look for clues in his work as to ethnic background, economic status, and geographical setting.

   Furthermore, they might be asked to consider certain formal qualities of his work: Where do Soto’s images and symbols come from? Does Soto attempt to make his work accessible to ordinary readers?

2. Soto’s work is fruitfully compared to other autobiographical poets (Lowell, Berryman, Plath) and to working-class poets such as Wright and Levine.

   Soto’s book *The Tale of Sunlight* (particularly in its final section) might be studied for its elements of “magical realism.”

   Soto, of course, can be studied in connection to other Chicano poets such as Lorna Dee Cervantes and Umar Salinas.

Bibliography

Probably the most useful general source of information on Soto (complete with various references) is the article on Soto in *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*, volume 82, “Chicano Writers” (1989).

Joy Harjo (Creek) (b. 1951)

*Contributing Editor: C. B. Clark*

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Classroom Issues and Strategies

It’s important to make certain that the students read the biographical notes and footnotes provided in the text. Consider also using audiotapes of Harjo reading and discussing her own work.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Imperialism, colonialism, dependency, nostalgia for the old ways, reverence for grandparents and elders, resentment of conditions of the present, plight of reservation and urban Indians, natural world, sense of hopelessness, power of the trickster, idea that the feminine is synonymous with heritage, deadly compromise, symbol of all that has been lost (such as the land), tension between the desire to retrieve the past and the inevitability of change, the arrogance of white people, problems of half-breeds (or mixed-bloods).

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Harjo uses free verse. She is aware of classic European form, but chooses not to use it. She does try oral chant, as in “She Had Some Horses.” She is not in any school, except American Indian.

Original Audience

Ask the question: Is there any audience outside American Indians? The second audience is the student and the third is the general reader.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. Who are the Creeks? What is their origin? What impact did removal have on the Five Civilized Tribes? Where are the Creeks today? How are they organized? What
was the role of the Christian missionary? What is traditional Creek religion? What is an urban Indian? Does Harjo travel much and is that reflected in her poetry?

2. Hand out a reading list, containing ethnographic, historical, and contemporary works on the Creeks. Hand out a theme list, containing such items as removal, acculturation, identity. Hand out a subject list containing topics such as removal, alcoholism, and jails. Ask the students to write an essay on each of the lists. Require some library research for the essays, which will provide background for the poetry.

Bibliography

There are no separate works on Harjo. Bits on her can be found in critical pieces on her work, in collections, in autobiographical pieces, and through interviews.

Published works that deal in part with her include Joseph Bruchac’s *Survival This Way* and Andrew O. Wiget’s *Native American Literature*, part of the Twayne series, as well as Laura Coltelli, ed., *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak*, and *World Literature Today*, Spring 1992.
Louise Erdrich (Chippewa) (b. 1954)

Contributing Editor: Andrew O. Wiget

Classroom Issues and Strategies

One problem in teaching Love Medicine is the intensity of religious experience, which many students in today’s secular society may have difficulty relating to. Another is the surrealistic imagery that Marie Lazarre uses in describing her relationship with Sister Leopolda. And yet a third is understanding the historical and cultural context of reservation life at this period of time in the 1930s.

In terms of the historical and cultural context, I would point out to students that Indian reservations in the 1930s were notorious for their poverty, their high mortality rate, their chronic unemployment, and the destruction of the fabric of Native American social and cultural forms. One of the principal policies of the United States government was to transform Native Americans into carbon copies of Anglo-Americans, and one of the principal ways that they hoped to accomplish this, ever since the Grant administration in the 1870s, was through religion.

During the 1870s, the Native American communities were allocated among the various major Christian sects, and missionary activity was understood to be an agent of social and cultural transformation. The objective was to get rid of the Indian while saving the man. Culture was imagined as a number of practices and behaviors and customs, which—if they could be changed—would eliminate all the historic obstacles to the Indians’ participation in Anglo-American culture. Of course, if they were eliminated, so would the Indian nest be eliminated. Religion then is hardly a simple spiritual force, but an agent of the interests of the Euro-American majority. Such an understanding, I think, should help students appreciate the intensity with which Marie and Sister Leopolda enter their confrontation.

A fine introduction to this story would be to spend a good deal of time focusing on the first paragraph, trying to understand the tone of the narrator and also the structure of her vision of herself, which she repeats later in the story. I would

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use the imagery and the tone as a way of developing the narrator’s sense of herself, and I would try to account for her intense antagonism to the “black robe women on the hill.”

Most students are puzzled by the intensity of the antagonism, and they have real questions as to whether or not Marie or Leopolda or both are crazy. Students tend to think that they’re crazy because of the surrealist imagery and because of the intensity of the emotion, which strikes most of them as excessive. Students need to realize that religion, especially when it is the lens through which other issues are magnified, can become the focus of such intense feelings, and that when one’s feelings are so intense, they frequently compel the creation of surrealist imagery as the only means to adequately shape what one sees.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

I think that there are two major themes that could be addressed in this story. The first is to understand religion, as described in the previous question, as a field upon which two different sets of interests contest their right to define the terms by which people will understand themselves and others. For all the black comedy in this story, the battle that Leopolda fights with the Dark One over the soul of Marie Lazarre is understood by both Leopolda and Marie as a very real battle. Leopolda represents a set of values, and so does the Dark One. Marie is understood as struggling to choose between the values of the Dark One and the values of Sister Leopolda, and these values are cultural as well as spiritual, for it is precisely the Indian character of Marie—her pride, her resistance to change, her imagination—that Leopolda identifies with the Dark One.

A second theme is to view the formation of identity in bicultural environments as an enriching, rather than an impoverishing, experience. Too often in bicultural situations, Indian protagonists are represented as being helpless, suspended in their inability to make a decision between two sets of values offered to them. The John Joseph Mathews novel Sundown is an example. In this story, however, Marie Lazarre chooses, and she chooses to identify herself as an Indian over and against the black robe sisters precisely by turning their own naïveté against them. The “veils of faith”
that she refers to early in this story not only prevent the sisters from seeing the truth, but they also obscure their faith from shining forth, like the Reverend Mr. Hooper’s veil in Hawthorne’s story “The Minister’s Black Veil.”

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

This story succeeds principally as a study of characterization. I would ask students to pay special attention to matters of tone and point of view. Since this story is told in the first person, I would ask them, on the basis of what they have read, to form an opinion of Marie Lazarre and, secondly, to develop some sense of her judgment of Sister Leopolda. I would ask them to look especially at the imagery and the language that Marie uses to describe her encounters with Leopolda and to describe herself, as the basis for their opinions.
Original Audience

The audience for whom this story is written is contemporary, but differs from the students we meet in university settings by perhaps being older and therefore more familiar with a traditional religiosity. Students who are not Catholic may need to know something about Catholicism, especially the role of nuns, and this historic role of missionaries in relationship to Indian communities. Other explicitly Catholic references, such as to the stigmata, are explained by their context in the story.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

This story can be usefully contrasted with some of Flannery O’Connor’s stories, which focus on the discovery of real faith, especially from a Catholic perspective. The emphasis on surrealistic imagery provides interesting connections with poems like those of Adrienne Rich; since this is a retrospective narrative, one might usefully compare this probing of a formative event from the narrator’s past with Rich’s poem “Diving into the Wreck.” Insofar as this offers us a sensitive and imaginative teenage minority narrator, the story invites comparisons with the work of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. In Native American terms, useful comparisons would be to Gertrude Bonnin’s “Why I Am a Pagan,” as well as John Oskison’s “The Problem of Old Harjo.”

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. I’ve never used questions ahead of time for this particular story, though if I did, I think they would be addressed to issues of characterization and tone.
2. An interesting assignment, because this story is told from Marie’s point of view, is to retell the encounter between Marie and Sister Leopolda from Sister Leopolda’s perspective. This would require students to formulate characterizations of Leopolda and of Marie, which would be useful touchstones for evaluating their comprehension of the issues on which the conflict in this
story rests.

Bibliography


Raymond Carver (1938–1988)

*Contributing Editor: Paul Jones*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

Carver has been quoted as saying that his stories could happen anywhere. That is pretty much true. Additionally, they are so contemporary that they require almost no background material or preparation for reading and understanding by an American audience. Even the issues of class (most of Carver’s characters, if they have jobs, are marginally employed), although they do exist in Carver stories, are not too heavily at play in “A Small, Good Thing.” However, this lack of location, class, and even time can be used to start a classroom discussion. You might ask: Where is this story set and in what year? How old are the characters? How does this affect your reading of the story? Does this lack diminish the story? Would it have been a better story if we knew it had been set in, say, Cleveland in May 1978? How would this story be read by readers outside of Carver’s culture? Would it be understood differently in France or in Cameroon? The questions can draw the class toward a discussion of style in literature and to one of the major issues for Carver: What constitutes a good story?

To bring Carver himself into the classroom, I
recommend the Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory interview found in Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction or in Alive and Writing: Interviews with American Authors of the 1980s as sources for rich Carver quotes and his own insights into the stories and the writing process. For example, Carver cites Isaac Babel’s dictum, “No iron can pierce the heart with such force as a period put in just the right place,” as one of his own guiding principles.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

In many of Carver’s stories, the issues of loss and of alcoholism are a part of the larger issue, which is the isolation and terror of people when a total breakdown of survival systems is at hand. The near-inarticulateness of his characters in the face of this terror and loss is significant and has been a major point of contention among his critics. Some say that Carver’s characters are too ordinary, underperceptive, and despairing to experience the philosophical questions of meaning into which they have been thrust. His defenders say that Carver characters demonstrate that people living marginal, routine lives can come close to experiencing insight and epiphany under pressure of intruding mysteries, such as the death of a loved one.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

You would definitely want to talk about “minimalism” in fiction. The style has become so pervasive that students may just assume that this pared-down method of storytelling is simply how one writes fiction. Frederick Barthelme writes that as a minimalist “you’re leaving room for the readers, at least for the ones who like to use their imaginations.” John Barth counters with this definition of a minimalist aesthetic: “[its] cardinal principle is that artistic effect may be enhanced by a radical economy of artistic means, even where such parsimony compromises other values: completeness, for example, or richness or precision of statement.” Carver was at first the most influential practitioner of minimalism, and then, through
the rewriting of his earlier stories, a writer who repudiated the style.

Luckily, Carver’s stories can be used to show both the power of the so-called minimalist approach and its limits. Have the students first read the brief (ten-page) story “The Bath,” which was the earlier version of “A Small, Good Thing.” “The Bath” is an excellent example of what minimalism does well and can be more terrifying and unsettling than anything by Stephen King. Contrasting and comparing “The Bath” and “A Small, Good Thing” from Carver’s later, more expansive period will allow the students to participate in the intense debate about style. Carver preferred the second version, but he didn’t pass judgment on those who like “The Bath” best.

Another useful approach for showing the nuances of revision at work in Carver’s writing is to look at a few other versions of his stories. A particularly illustrative case is a short-short-story of under five hundred words that has been known as “Mine” (Furious Seasons), “Popular Mechanics” (What We Talk About When We Talk About Love), and “Little Things” (Where I’m Calling From). The last two differ only in title, but there are significant differences in “Mine.” Students need not be textual critics to talk about the choices that Carver has made in the various versions of his stories.

Finally, students can be asked to consider the effect of translating Carver’s story into film narrative by watching the relevant portion of Robert Altman’s Short Cuts.

Original Audience

Carver’s stories were published in most of the important slick magazines of the seventies and eighties including Esquire and The New Yorker. All along the way his work also appeared in small literary magazines. David Bellamy called Carver “the most influential stylist since Donald Barthelme.” He was writing for writers, for those who appreciated experimental literature as well as for a general, though sophisticated, reading audience.

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Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Anton Chekhov, Franz Kafka, and Ernest Hemingway are the obvious influences on Carver’s work. The seemingly simple pared-down style of writing follows straight through to Carver. You might consider teaching Carver and Hemingway and perhaps Donald Barthelme together, then entering into a discussion of the bare bones style of each.

Another way to consider Carver’s style is to remember that he began writing poetry before he tried fiction and continued writing and publishing poetry throughout his career. He said (in a Paris Review interview with Mona Simpson), “In magazines, I always turned to poems first before I read the stories. Finally, I had to make a choice, and I came down on the side of fiction. It was the right choice for me.” Carver’s poetry has been compared to that of William Carlos Williams, although I see many obvious differences in their approach, sense of the line, and sense of narrative. His poetry can also be compared to that of James Wright, particularly with respect to the class of people from which the poems and stories are drawn.

Bibliography

The following collections by Carver include stories mentioned above:


Critical books on Carver are as follows:


Carver talks about his writing and the writing of others in the following books:


The following book of photographs helps show the locations for several of Carver’s stories:


I find it always helpful to hear the author read his stories, which is especially true in the case of Carver, although only the following early tape is available:


“A Small, Good Thing” can be found on tape (but not read by Carver) in the following:

Wendy Rose (Hopi) (b. 1948)

*Contributing Editor: C. B. Clark*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

Background knowledge about Indian culture and history will help students pick up on comments about imperialism, removals, atrocities, resentments, etc.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

Themes are colonialism, imperialism, dependency, nostalgia for the old ways, reverence for grandparents, resentment for conditions of the present, plight of reservation and urban Indians, sense of hopelessness, the power of the trickster, feminism as synonymous with heritage, deadly compromise, symbolism of all that has been lost (such as land), tension between the desire to retrieve the past and the inevitability of change, arrogance of white people, problems of half-breeds (or mixed-bloods).

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Rose uses free verse. She is aware of classical European form but chooses not to use it. In addition, she is less an oral poet using chants and more of a lyric poet. She is not in any school, except American Indian.

**Original Audience**

I ask this question: Is there an audience outside American Indians? A second audience, of course, would be the students in class. A third audience would be the general reader.
Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. What are the major themes of Hopi religion? Who are the Hopi? Where do they live? Why do they lie atop mesas? Where do the Hopi claim to come from? What contemporary problems do they face? Who are some Hopi leaders today? How do the Hopi view the world?

2. Hand out a reading list on the Hopi, containing ethnographic, historical, and contemporary works. Hand out a theme list, containing topics like manifest destiny or acculturation. Hand out a subject list, with subjects like alcoholism, jails, and kachinas. Then, ask students to write an essay using Rose’s works in reference to any of these topics.

Bibliography

No single biographical or critical work exists on Rose. Information must be gleaned from critical pieces, collections, and book reviews. Additionally, information can come from autobiographical statements preceding selections printed in anthologies of American Indian works.

Rose is included in Joseph Bruchac’s Survival This Way, Swann and Krupat’s I Tell You Now, Andrew Wiget’s Native American Literature, and Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak, edited by Laura Coltelli.


Rita Dove (b. 1952)

Contributing Editor: Hilary Holladay

Classroom Issues and Strategies

In my experience, students like Dove’s poems, even though they don’t fully understand them. I found that dividing the...
class into small groups (and providing them with several discussion questions) works well with her poems. This gives students a chance to raise issues they might not air otherwise—and accommodates poems that seem to be more about asking questions than answering them. Walking from group to group, I am able to address specific concerns without usurping control of a free-flowing discussion.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

In her poems, Dove often distills the experiences of oppressed groups: women, blacks, and working-class Americans, among others. She does not strike a victim’s pose, however. Whether she is dealing with contemporary scenes or historical events, she speaks with the calm confidence of one who knows she will be listened to.

As an African-American woman who has spent virtually her entire adult life affiliated with one university or another, she represents an intriguing mix of “outsider” and “insider” perspectives. The academic life seems to have provided her with a forum quite compatible with her interest in the intersections of the personal, the political, and the intellectual. As an American who believes strongly in the value of traveling to other countries and learning other languages, Dove brings an international perspective to many of her poems as well.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Dove has published several prose books and a verse drama, but she seems most at home in lyric poetry. Although the prose poem published here is a departure from her usual style, it is characteristic of Dove’s interest in obliquely stated narratives. *Thomas and Beulah*, a narrative sequence, is hardly straightforward in its development; in that Pulitzer Prize–winning collection, Dove provides the pieces with which we can envision (and continually reenvision) the evolving puzzle of two interwoven lives. Something similar occurs in her
Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Dove can be grouped with other African-American poets, women poets, and poets exemplary for their use of imagery. Because of her German and Scandinavian influences, her poems would also work well in a comparative literature course.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. Study questions for the Dove poems selected here might focus on voice and perspective, characterization, and rhetorical strategies. For example, how would you describe the speaker in each of these poems? What is the speaker’s perspective on the events described in each poem? How does the mood differ from poem to poem? How does “Kentucky, 1833” blend the historical with the personal? What are the paradoxes at work in this poem? How is the poem’s form significant? How would you paraphrase “Ö”? Can you think of other words, in English or other languages, that change “the whole neighborhood”? Explain your selections. What do you think the speaker in “Arrow” means by “the language of fathers”? What is the significance of the enjambment and the three-line stanzas in “The Oriental Ballerina”?

2. Students writing about Dove’s poems should read all (or at least a couple) of her poetry collections so they will have a sense of the breadth of her concerns. Their papers could address family relationships, narrative perspective, or her enigmatic image patterns. They could also explore her international themes or compare one or more of her poems about family life with those of another woman poet—such as Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, or Lucille Clifton. An alternative assignment: Write a letter to Dove and present her with a possible interpretation of one of her poems. Then pose several questions that would help you develop your interpretation and perhaps help you better understand her other poems as well.
latter assignment worked well in an advanced composition class, because it enabled students to develop their skills in writing query letters as well as analyzing poetry.

**Bibliography**

Numerous interviews with Dove have been published since her tenure as poet laureate. See, for example, Malin Pereira’s interview with her in *Contemporary Literature* 40.2 (Summer 1999): 182–213. Here, Dove discusses her verse drama, *The Darker Face of the Earth*, and comments on the Black Arts Movement as well as the relation between “national” history and her personal experience as a black woman. Another good resource is the journal *Callaloo*, which has published a number of essays on Dove; the Winter 1996 issue, for instance, contains several articles on her sonnet sequence, *Mother Love*. In addition to a recent surge of journal essays and book chapters on Dove’s work, a new study looks at the whole of Dove’s work: Therese Steffen’s *Crossing Color: Transcultural Space and Place in Rita Dove’s Poetry, Fiction, and Drama* (2000).

**Li-Young Lee (b. 1957)**

*Contributing Editor: Zhou Xiaojing*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

In discussing Li-Young Lee’s poems it is important to avoid tendencies toward ethnocentric and Eurocentric readings. Some readers tend to overemphasize the “Chinese sensibility” in Lee’s poems without acknowledging the influence of biblical writings and Western literature on Lee’s work; others tend to judge Lee’s poems as “sentimental,” without placing them within the context of his family history and personal experience as a refugee and immigrant. Students will better understand the importance of family, especially of Lee’s
father, in his poems when provided with some specific biographical information.

In her discussion of Li-Young Lee’s poems, Judith Kitchen says that though “the story is personal and unique, the poems are declamatory, public even in their intimacy” (“Auditory Imagination” 161). Such a stance of the “lyric I” in Lee’s poetry would be a good starting point for classroom discussions. Some critics argue that the authoritative and transcendental “lyric I” is inaccessible to Asian-American poets. Others regard the utterances of the “lyric I” as an outdated mode of Romantic lyric poetry. Indeed, many contemporary poets such as the New York School poets, Language poets, and some Asian-American poets, are resisting the Romantic “lyric I.” It might be interesting to compare Lee’s speaking “I” with that in poems of Wordsworth, of the American “confessional” poets, of John Ashbery, Charles Olson, Gary Snyder, and other Asian-American poets such as Garrett Hongo and Cathy Song, as well as African, Latino, and Native American poets. This comparison would yield more insights when it is situated in the poets’ respective historical and social contexts. Students may also be asked to consider the relationship between the individual and the collective identities for European Americans and minority Americans, and to investigate the connections between identities and the status of the “lyric I.”

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

The major themes in Lee’s poems, such as love, loss, exile, the evanescence of life, human mortality, displacement and disconnection, the necessity and violence of change, cultural and racial identity, are in one way or another related to Lee’s unique experience and to his bicultural heritage. These themes develop over the years in depth and scope from his first book, Rose, to his second, The City in Which I Love You, and culminate in the last poem of his second volume, “The Cleaving,” often considered his best and a significantly “American” poem. Lee’s distinctive style and voice are also markedly established in this poem, which can be read in connection with the poems carved on the walls of barracks by Chinese immigrants detained on Angel Island and in the
context of racism and racial stereotypes in American history and culture. Bret Harte’s poem “Plain Language from Truthful James,” better known as “The Heathen Chinee” (1870), can be used to contrast Lee’s representation of the Chinese in “The Cleaving.” Discussions of Lee’s poem in connection with Harte’s representational tactics in constructing the “Otherness” of the Chinese can yield some insights into the notions and constructions of the American identity in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature.

Lee’s prose-poem autobiography, The Winged Seed: A Remembrance, is very informative of his family history, his difficulty with the English language as a child, his search for the possibilities of language as a poet, the connection of his life to his father’s, and his understanding of “death in life,” all of which underlie the subject matter of his poems.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Lee has developed a flexible strategy in employing imagery for multiple functions. He often uses a central image to organize and develop his ideas and feelings through free association. His representations of images sometimes reflect and enhance emotions (“I Ask My Mother to Sing”) and sometimes visualize the felt quality of a particular reality (“Persimmons”). While Lee’s use of imagery to express feelings and perceptions may be influenced by classical Chinese poetry, his strategy of employing the anecdotal descriptive-narrative as a springboard to launch into the emotional and abstract is characteristic of contemporary American poetry.

But the down-to-earth, sometimes violent sensualness of Lee’s images, and their unlikely metaphorical connections and surprising transformations within a single poem, are unmistakably the results of Lee’s innovative style. The surrealistic quality in Lee’s style partly derives from French surrealism, in which Lee discerns “a new interiority,” and partly from Lao Zi and Chuang Zi, in whose writings Lee finds freedom and sanity in the seemingly irrational.

**Original Audience**

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Lee does not like to be confined by the label of “an Asian-American poet.” One of his goals as a poet is to “birth a new and genuine . . . interiority into the world” (Li-Young Lee’s letter to the author, May 1995). His poems, written in plain speech and accessible style, appeal to a general audience. As Lee writes in “With Ruins,” his poems offer a space “for those who own no place/to correspond to ruins in the soul” (the City in Which I Love You 45).

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

In his foreword to Rose, Gerald Stern has singled out one of Lee’s differences from other contemporary American poets. “The ‘father’ in contemporary poetry,” Stern notes, “tends to be either a pathetic soul or a bungler or a sweet loser, overwhelmed by the demands of family and culture and workplace. . . . The father in Lee’s poems is nothing like that” (9). It would be mutually illuminating to compare the father figure in Lee’s poems with those in poems by Robert Lowell (“Commander Lowell”), Anne Sexton (“All My Pretty Ones”), Sylvia Plath (“Daddy”), and Cathy Song (“The Tower of Pisa”) in relation to their cultural and historical contexts and in terms of their specific personal situations.

A similar comparative approach can also be used in discussing Lee’s treatment of love, death, and the body. Use, for example, “The Song of Songs,” poems by John Donne, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and Dylan Thomas, particularly his “The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower” and “Fern Hill.”

Bibliography

Primary Sources


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*Secondary Sources*


Lorna Dee Cervantes (b. 1954)

Contributing Editor: Juan Bruce-Novoa

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students may object to the strident tone of “Poem for the Young White Man.” Even Chicanos can get turned off by it. The feminism has the same effect on the men. Why is she so hostile toward males, they ask. Some now say that she is passé, radicalism being a thing of the sixties. I prepare the students with information on feminist issues, especially the single-parent families, wife abuse, and child abuse. I also prepare them by talking about racial and ethnic strife as a form of warfare, seen as genocide by minority groups.

I use Bernice Zamora’s poetry as an introduction. Her alienation from the male rituals in “Penitents” produces the all-female family in “Beneath. . . .” The sense of living in one’s own land, but under other’s rules (Zamora’s “On Living in Aztlán”), explains the bitterness of “Poem for the Young White Man.” And both of the poets eventually find a solution in their relation to nature through animal imagery; yet just like Zamora in “Pico Blanco,” Cervantes maintains an uneasy relationship with the macho world with which women still contend.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

The historical theme of the disappearance of the nuclear family in the United States is primary here. There is also the effect of urban renewal on ethnic and poor communities whose neighborhoods were often the targets for projects that dislodged people from an area. In “Crow” there is the theme of finding a link in nature to counter urban alienation.

On the personal level, Cervantes’s family history is reflected auto-biographically in “Beneath. . . .”
Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Cervantes uses the form of the narrative poem, with a few key metaphors. Her confessional mode is reminiscent of Robert Lowell’s. Her style is conversational, direct, unpretentious, but there is a constant sharp edge to her verses, a menacing warning against overstepping one’s welcome.

Original Audience

Although her audience was and is generally “third worldist” and Chicano, these poems show a range of different target audiences. “Beneath . . .” is a feminist poem, appealing greatly to women. When it was first published, there was little discussion of the issue of female heads of households in Chicano circles because few wanted to admit to the problem in the Chicano community. Now the discussion is much more common.

“Poem for . . .” had great appeal in the closing days of the radical movement, but has since faded to a smaller audience of older Chicanos who have heard the radical poetry to the point of exhaustion. However, mainstream liberals like “Poem for . . .” because it speaks as they assume all minorities should speak, harshly, bitterly, and violently. Young Chicanos are once again picking up the strident tone, faced as they are with the economic decline that has exacerbated social problems, especially in urban schools.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

I compare her to Margaret Atwood in their sense of women being submerged and needing to surface by finding their own traditions. They both have a capacity for stringent statement when pushed by violent circumstances. Both have strong links to nature, in which their ancestors cultivated, not only food, but their culture. Comparisons with Bernice Zamora are suggested above.

Carlos Castaneda’s theory of the enemy is significant for
Cervantes. It explains how the “Young White Man” is tempting the author into violence.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. Students are asked to consider the significance of mainstream con-struction projects on local communities; from here they are asked to ponder the cycle of change and its victims.
2. Write on the links between “Beneath . . .” and “Poem for . . .”
3. Write on Cervantes’s view of the world as a threat to existence and what she offers as a response.

Bibliography


Aurora Levins Morales (b. 1954)

Contributing Editor: Frances R. Aparicio

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Since Levins Morales’s major book is authored in collaboration with her mother, Rosario Morales, it would be appropriate to present her work in this context. Instructors could familiarize themselves with Getting Home Alive and make a selection of texts in which the dialogue—as well as the differences—between mother and daughter is exemplified.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues
Major themes in Aurora Levins Morales’s work: identity as a female minority in the U.S.; feminism; multiple identity (Puerto Rican, Jewish, North American), also inherited versus self-defined identities; concept of immigrant; Jewish culture and traditions; mother/daughter relationships; importance of language, reading, words, and writing; remembering and memory as a vehicle to surpass sense of fragmentation and exile/displacement; images of spaces and cities; “internationalist” politics.
Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Heterogeneous forms and texts constitute Levins Morales’s writings. *Getting Home Alive* is a collage of poems, short stories, lyrical prose pieces, essays, and dialogues. Note the importance of eclectic style: She is lyrical, subdued at times, sensorial, and quite visual in her imagery. She does not belong to any major literary movement; her writings cannot be easily categorized into one style or another, though they definitely respond to the preoccupations of other U.S. women of color.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Fruitful comparisons can be drawn to the works of other women of color, such as Cherríe Moraga, *Loving in the War Years* in *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas*, eds. Gómez, Moraga, Romo-Carmona (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983). Levins Morales has been particularly influenced by Alice Walker. In addition, I believe comparisons and contrasts with mainstream U.S. feminist writers would also prove valuable.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

1. Study questions would deal with textural analysis and with clarifying references to Spanish words, places in Puerto Rico or El Barrio, and other allusions that might not be clear to students.
2. (a) Have students do their own version of “Child of the Americas” in order to look into their own inheritance and cross-cultural identities.
   (b) Paper topics might include the importance of multiple identity and “internationalist” politics; comparison and contrast of mother’s and daughter’s experiences, points of view, language, and style; meaning of language, reading, and writing for Levins Morales; an analysis of images of space, borders, urban centers, mobility, exile, displacement; contrast to Nuyorican writers from El Barrio; How would Levins Morales diverge from this movement,
and why should she still be considered as representative of Puerto Rican writers in the United States?

Bibliography


Sandra Cisneros (b. 1954)

*Contributing Editor: Lora Romero*

Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students generally find reading Cisneros a delightful experience. The brevity and humor of her stories help make them accessible even to those unfamiliar with the Mexican-American culture in which much of her writing is set. In fact, one of my colleagues taught Cisneros very successfully to students in Galway, Ireland.

One potential source of discomfort for students is Cisneros’s mani-festly feminist sensibility. Some students may accuse her (as they would accuse virtually any other feminist writer) of “man-bashing.” When this issue comes up, I point out that, ironically, defining feminism in that way makes men the center of attention. Then I encourage students to talk about what they think feminism means and/or should mean. Sometimes students with more sophisticated definitions of feminism can convince their peers that feminism does not
reduce to man-hating; in any case, giving students a forum for talking through the issue is usually productive since it is one about which they will probably have strong (if unexamined and unarticulated) opinions.

The feminism of women of color, however, is complicated by ethnic identification. Some students will be assuming that ethnic authors should offer only “positive” images of minorities—which means, in effect, talking about sexism in minority communities is off-limits. I encourage students to interrogate their assumptions about ethnic authors’ “duties.” At the same time, I acknowledge that being both a woman of color and a feminist can be a difficult task since one of the stereotypes of Latino men (and nonwhite men generally) is that “they treat their women badly.” Then I try to turn students’ attention back to the text to see if they can find evidence that some tension between ethnic and gender identity is shaping the narrative.
Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues

Students may bring to Cisneros’s work a conception of immigrant culture that is based on the model of European immigration to the United States. That model is not entirely appropriate; in fact, Chicanos have a saying: “We didn’t come to the United States. It came to us.” Before the Mexican-American War (1846–48), most of what is now the southwestern United States (including Texas and California) was part of Mexico. After the war, many erstwhile Mexicans automatically became U.S. citizens when it annexed the land where Mexicans had lived since the sixteenth century. Reminding students that national boundaries are often arbitrarily imposed should help deepen their understanding of national culture. In addition, most students will have only linear and unidirectional models of “assimilation” for understanding ethnic cultures, but the culture of Latinos living in the U.S. has been shaped by a very different historical experience. Anthropologists and historians have argued that the southwestern United States is really part of a much older, regional culture that includes Northern Mexico, and that this regional culture is constantly being reinvigorated by a continuous flow of population back and forth over the border.

One important theme in Cisneros’s work is the heterogeneity of the Mexican-American community (as it is expressed through differences of class, gender, education, language use, politics, and so on). Cisneros is, typically, more interested in detailing the dynamics of her own community rather than representing conflicts between Anglo Americans and Mexican Americans. Conflicts between Anglo and Latino cultures are, of course, present in Cisneros’s writing, but they often take the form of encounters between relatively assimilated Latinos and relatively unassimilated ones.

The shape of such encounters undoubtedly reflects personal issues in the sense that Cisneros, as an educated, middle-class intellectual, seems simultaneously committed to identifying with her Mexican-American characters and to never losing sight of her difference from them. Often in her stories, there is a narrator or character who seems to represent Cisneros herself: a Chicana artist who has done something to scandalize her community, who exists (as it were) on the
border between Mexican-American and Anglo-American cultures, and who has an uneasy relation to both.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Cisneros’s stories typically move in the direction of reconciliation of the Chicana intellectual with the Mexican-American community, but not all of her stories achieve that resolution. Cisneros’s work thus provides fertile grounds for discussion of the politics of narrative closure. For this reason, it would be helpful if, before reading Cisneros, students had some sense of the conventions of the short story. Cisneros writes in a modernist narrative mode with both North American and Latin American precursors. Her stories do not typically center on a single consciousness or point of view; they are often populated by voices rather than characters; if there is an identifiable narrator, she is usually ironized.

In a more advanced class where you can assume some familiarity with a modernist narrative, you could use Cisneros as a test case for differentiating between modernism and postmodernism. In addition to formal considerations, some topics crucial to such discussion would include Cisneros’s feminism, her ethnic identification, and her attitude toward mass culture.

**Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections**

To encourage students to think about how ethnic feminist writers negotiate between their gender and their ethnic identifications, it would be worthwhile to compare Cisneros to writers like Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, Louise Erdrich, and Helena María Viramontes. On the other hand, reading Cisneros in the context of contemporary Latin American women writers (for example, Claire Lipesector, Isabel Allende, Carolina María de Jesus) would put pressure on received categories of national/cultural identity. Including even one Latin American writer at the end of a course on what is called “American Literature” can be a useful way of getting students to think about the ethnocentrism of the term and the politics of cultural study more generally.

For contrast as much as comparison, Cisneros might also
be placed in the context of nonfiction writings by lesbian Chicana writers like Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga. The comparison/contrast helps bring atten-tion to the specifically heterosexual nature of Cisneros’s feminism: How does the fact that Cisneros is heterosexual (and hence unable to declare herself simply “independent” of men) shape her articulation of feminism and illuminate the particular erotic dilemmas faced by her female characters? In order to highlight the question of class, pairing Cisneros with Tomás Rivera works well because—although Cisneros has certain stylistic affinities with Rivera—his work is more obviously compatible with the version of Chicano identity constructed by the Chicano movement.

Bibliography

Cisneros’s *House on Mango Street* has already generated a number of critical responses, including: Ellen McCracken, “Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*: Community-Oriented Introspection and the Demystification of Patriarchal Violence” in Asunción Horno-Delgado et al. (eds.), *Breaking Boundaries: Latina Writings and Critical Readings* (1989); Julián Olivares, “Sandra Cisneros’ ‘The House on Mango Street’ and the Poetics of Space” in María Hererra-Sobek and Helena María Viramontes (eds.), *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: Charting New Frontiers in American Literature* (1988); Ramón Saldívar, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (1990); and Alvina E. Quintana, *Home Girls: Chicano Literary Voices* (1996). There is also a growing body of work on *Woman Hollering Creek*. Particularly interesting studies of language, identity, and authenticity can be found in Katherine Rios, “‘And you know what I have to say isn’t always pleasant’: Translating the Unspoken Word in Cisneros’ *Woman Hollering Creek*” in María Hererra-Sobek and Helena María Viramontes, eds., *Chicana (W)rites on Word and Film* (1995); Jean Wyatt, “On Not Being *La Malinche*: Border Negotiations of Gender in Sandra Cisneros’s ‘Never Marry a Mexican’ and ‘Woman Hollering Creek,’ ” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 14 (Fall 1995); and Harry-ette Mullen, “‘A Silence between Us Like a Language’: The Untranslatability of Experience in Sandra Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering Creek,*” *MELUS* 21 (Summer 1996). One study of
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Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna) (b. 1948)

*Contributing Editor: Norma C. Wilson*

**Classroom Issues and Strategies**

When I first began to read Silko’s poetry and fiction, I attempted to use the critical methods I had used in my prior study of European and American literature. I sought primary sources of the traditional stories that appeared in her work. But I soon found that very little of the traditional literature of the Lagunas had been recorded in writing. I realized that I needed to know more of the background—cultural and historical—of Silko’s writing.

In the spring of 1977, I arranged to meet with Silko at the University of New Mexico. She explained to me that her writing had evolved from an outlook she had developed as a result of hearing the old stories and songs all her life. She also led me to a number of helpful written sources, including Bertha P. Dutton and Miriam A. Marmon’s *The Laguna Calendar* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1936) and the transcript of an interview with Mrs. Walter K. Marmon in the Special Collections Department of the Zimmerman Library, U.N.M. Another source I’ve found helpful is Leslie A. White, “The Acoma Indians” (*Forty-seventh Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1932). Leslie Silko’s *Yellow Woman and a Body of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996) provides invaluable insights about the beliefs, oral traditions, and history of the Laguna pueblo and details Silko’s own life experiences.

One can use the videotape, *Running on the Edge of the Rainbow*, produced by Larry Evers at the University of
Arizona, Tucson. A more recent video, *Leslie Marmon Silko* (produced by Matteo Bellinelli and published by Films for the Humanities in Princeton, New Jersey, 1995), can also be useful. I often begin looking at Silko’s writing by using a transparency of her poem “Prayer to the Pacific.” Students frequently come to think in new ways about their relationships to nature and about the exploitation of Native American people and the natural earth. They ask such questions as, “Did the government really do that to the Navajos?”

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

In teaching “Lullaby,” the idea of harmony is essential—the Navajo woman is balanced because she is aware of her relation to the natural world, that she is a part of it and that is the most important relationship. This allows her to nurture as the earth nurtures. One should emphasize forced changes in the Navajo way of life that have resulted from the encroachment of industry and the government on Navajo land. Today the struggle centering on Big Mountain would be a good focus. Of course, alcoholism and the splitting up of Indian families would be other important issues to focus on.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

It is important to note that Silko’s fiction is a blending of traditional with modern elements. And just as “Lullaby” ends with a song, many of Silko’s other works are also a blend of prose and poetry.

**Original Audience**

“Lullaby” seems to be a story from out of the 1950s. We talk about the U.S. government’s relocation policy during that decade. Relocation was an attempt to remove Indians from reservations and relocate them in urban environments. We also discuss the long history of the U.S. government removing Indian children from their families and culture. Recently this
kind of removal has been somewhat reversed by the Indian Child Welfare Act, which gives the tribes authority over the placement of the children enrolled in these tribes.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

One might compare and contrast Silko’s work with that of Simon J. Ortiz. One might also consider comparing and contrasting it with the work of James Wright, Gary Snyder, and Louise Erdrich.

Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

One might ask the students to look up specific places mentioned in the story on a map—Cebolleta Creek, Long Mesa, Cañoncito, etc.

1. Discuss the importance of the oral tradition in Silko’s writing.
2. Discuss the structure of Silko’s fiction. Is it linear or cyclic?
3. What is the image of woman in Silko’s fiction? Compare or contrast this with the images of women in the broader context of American society and culture.
4. What criticisms of American society are implicit in Silko’s fiction?
5. What Navajo cultural values are evident in the story “Lullaby”?

Bibliography


Simon Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo) (b. 1941)

Classroom Issues and Strategies

The principal problem with Ortiz’s poetry from a student perspective is that it is so intensely political and that it takes a political view of past events. Students can be reactionary and feel that what is past is past, and that there has been too much of a tendency to cast aspersions upon America’s reputation in recent years. This jingoism is often accompanied by a belief that poetry should not be political, but rather should concern itself with eternal truths. These are not problems that are associated with Ortiz’s poetry exclusively, of course, but are part of the naive vision of poetry that teachers of literature struggle to overcome.

I think it’s very important to begin this poem with a reflection upon the historical experiences of Native Americans. Begin with the historical epi-graph describing the Sand Creek Massacre of Black Kettle’s band which gives this poem sequence its name. That particular massacre is very well documented and students should spend some time trying to understand the forces that came together to create that massacre: Colonel Chivington’s own political ambitions; his ability to mobilize the fears and anxieties of the frontier Colorado communities; his success at taking advantage of the militarization of the frontier during the Civil War; the remoteness of Chivington’s forces from federal supervision; and the nonresistance of the Indians.

A second important issue to be discussed is how well we all use key events in the past to give us a sense of what our history is, emphasizing that the historical memory of people is selective and formed for very contemporary reasons.

I think that there are certain key lines in the poetry that are worth looking at in some detail. In addition, I ask students to look at the relationships between the epigraphs and the poems, how each speaks to the other. Finally, I ask students how these poems as a group, framed as they are by the boldfaced short poems about America, and prefaced by the historical statement concerning the Sand Creek Massacre,
work together to create a unified statement.

The poems move between some very concrete historical references (on the one hand) such as those to Cotton Mather, Kit Carson, and Saigon, and (on the other hand) to some highly surrealistic imagery and abstract language. Students frequently have difficulty bringing the two together, and it’s helpful to explore some of Ortiz’s more provocative statements as a way of creating the matrix of values from which the poetry emerges.

**Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, Personal Issues**

The major theme of Ortiz’s poem sequence is that Euro-Americans were as much victims of their own ambitions and blindness as were Native Americans, and the recognition by Euro-Americans that they have victimized themselves is the first step toward the beginning of a healing of America that will be based on a common appreciation of our shared responsibility for her future.

**Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions**

Certainly the principal formal question will be the juxtaposition of the epigraphs, with their blunt ideological focus, and the poems, with their convoluted syntax and high rhetoric. It would be important to remind students, I think, that Ortiz’s cycle of poems about the American historical experience is only one example in a long history of poetry about the American historical experience that stretches back through Hart Crane’s *The Bridge* and Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* to early national poems such as Joel Barlow’s *The Columbiad*.

**Original Audience**

I don’t think the original audience for this poetry is significantly different from the student audience, except perhaps in their political orientation (the students may be more conservative). These poems were written at the end of the seventies and represent in some sense a considered reflection
upon the traumatization of the American psyche by the
domestic turmoil of the 1960s, the loss of confidence evoked
by Watergate, and crisis of conscience provoked by the
Vietnam War. Many of the younger students who will be
reading these poems for the first time remember none of those
events.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Certainly I think Whitman, whom Ortiz does admire greatly,
can be invoked. Ortiz tries to cultivate a prophetic voice and a
historical vision similar to Whitman’s. I think he may also be
effectively contrasted with many writers for whom a historical
criticism of America’s past terminates in an attitude of despair.
Ortiz has transformed anger into hope through compassion.
Questions for Reading, Discussion, and Writing

I would look at the first poem and ask students what is meant by the juxtaposition of the lines “No waste land./No forgiveness.” Or have students look at the third poem, which may be an even more provocative example, and ask them why Ortiz believes he should have stolen the sweater from the Salvation Army store, and why, in the end, he didn’t.

Bibliography


